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Arrested By Jesus

Acts 9:1-19

Intro: We have been tracing the movement of the Gospel message from its starting point in the city of Jerusalem where it has been declared by the Apostles, by believers and most effectively, by Stephen, one of the first deacons. After Stephen testified of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Gospel baton was picked up by Philip and carried north into Samaria, where there was a great response and then, by a miraculous divine appointment, Philip was carried by the Holy Spirit to the south on the road to Gaza. It was there that he led a curious Ethiopian official to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the work He accomplished on the cross for our salvation.

Now, in **ch9**, we've come to one of the preeminent events of the NT. After the resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Saul is probably the greatest event in church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The importance of this event is evidenced by the fact that the story is told 2 more times in **Acts**; once in **ch22** and again in **ch26**. These later accounts are not just summaries but full accounts, each with its own specific emphasis. It's significant that in such a short book, one that covers the spread of Christianity from its microscopic beginnings in Jerusalem to a religion that reached a whole empire, the story of one man's conversion should be so greatly noted.

It is significant but it should not be surprising because, more than any other person in the 1st Century Church, Saul of Tarsus picked up the message of the cross of Jesus Christ and carried it throughout the Roman Empire. He wasn't the only one to do this but he was undoubtedly the most tenacious, most comprehensive and the most passionate of all those who hazarded their lives for the Gospel. Obviously and correctly, Luke perceived Saul's conversion to be a watershed event for the Church.

We met Saul at the beginning of **ch8** but what can we say about his early life? What can we say about the man? All we really know about his early life was that he was a full Roman citizen from the city of Tarsus and that he had an outstanding education. Oftentimes, education is not emphasized in many churches and that may lead some who are thinking about Christian ministry

to question whether education is necessary or even worth their while. Is it? a quick Bible survey should help answer that question. Who was the most influential person in the OT? Moses. Was he educated? Of course, he was educated in “all the wisdom of the Egyptian” (7:22). He received spiritual training from his parents when he was a child but his formal training was the best around at the time and it was definitely secular.

Who was the most influential person in the NT, apart from Jesus? The Apostle Paul. How was he educated? He had the best possible education a person in his time could have. It was also secular, whether in Tarsus or Jerusalem. Sure, his education in Jerusalem was religious but it was the modern equivalent of going to an Ivy League school to study in their religious department. His was an extensive study of the Jewish religion and he did learn the traditions of Judaism but it was not a true spiritual education for his heart was not yet touched by God.

With this in mind, clearly, education is important and an educated person is extremely useful to the Lord’s work. It doesn’t preclude service in the ministry. Anyone can be of service at any time or stage of life, even while receiving an education. But, a good education often precedes an effective ministry for the Lord. Now, that doesn’t mean if you’ve already passed that stage of life that you can’t be effective in ministry. Remember, God used a donkey to speak to Balaam and He uses a close equivalent to speak to Grace Chapel on a weekly basis. God can and will use anyone who is surrendered and obedient but a good education has the potential to carry you further in that work.

With Paul’s educational background in mind; what did he think of Christians before he met Jesus? Obviously, he thought they were wrong but why? As a Jew Paul was monotheistic – he believed in only one God. Christians, on the other hand, were saying that Jesus was God. He would’ve considered that polytheism – more than one God. If Jesus is God and Jehovah is God, there’d have to at least be 2 gods. Christianity was incompatible with Judaism.

Paul would have also considered Christianity to be deceptive because of the great claims it made. It not only claimed Jesus was the Son of God, it also claimed that He had proved this by His resurrection from the dead. If Christianity was wrong, as Paul thought, then Jesus hadn’t risen from the

dead and wasn't God. Those who were saying He had been raised from the dead and thus, was God were consciously trying to deceive the Jewish people.

Now, Christians were claiming this in the very city where the tomb was located. Everyone knew the tomb was empty. If the Jewish leaders had been able to produce the body of Jesus, they would've done it and destroyed Christianity as quickly as it had started. The fact that they couldn't produce the body was a great embarrassment to them. Still, they tried to explain it away saying that the disciples came & stole the body (Mt 28). That's what Saul believed. So it wasn't just that Christianity was wrong; it was a terrible lie and it was leading people away from the truth. This gives us some insight as to why he was so zealous in his persecution of believers; he thought he was doing God a service.

But, even though Saul believed what he was doing was right, there was still something nagging in his conscience. The Lord is going to point this out to him when He says, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (5b). How could this be if he was convinced he was right? What could have been bothering him in the back of his mind as he was bringing great persecution to the followers of Jesus? The explanation has to be with his limited but moving exposure to Stephen at the time of his execution. God used this terrible event to begin to prepare Saul's heart to receive Him.

The trial of Stephen was probably the first time in his life that Saul came face-to-face with a true, articulate Christian. Stephen had to have made a big impression on him. Though Stephen's education wasn't as formal and thorough as Saul's, when he gave his testimony before the Sanhedrin, he revealed a knowledge of the Scriptures that was superior and more perceptive than that of any on the council sitting in judgment him. And, he displayed it effortlessly, as if it were a natural part of him. He made his points clearly and drove them home powerfully. Could Saul have given such a powerful address?

Saul must have also been impressed with Stephen's last words as he claimed to see the "Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (7:56). Could he have just been lying? What – at that moment, under those circumstances, when he is about to stand before the great Judge of all men? If it were a lie, what possible reason did he have to hold on to such an

evil deception? If it were a deception, it was of the highest order and Saul could not afford to entertain any other alternative reason. But, knowing the mind Saul had, it still must have impressed him greatly.

Finally, we must consider the way Stephen died. He didn't die screaming in anguish. No' he calmly and consciously repeated the dying words of His Master when he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (7:59-60). I wonder if Saul questioned whether he could die like that, with peace of mind and heart. Was his faith in Judaism as strong as Stephen's faith was in Jesus Christ? Did he have the moral character to ask forgiveness for his executioners at the moment he was being killed? These had to be the things that were nagging his conscience but, he didn't let that stop him. Prejudices die hard. Though these thoughts were a goad to his mind, Saul was still kicking against them. It was while he was in this state of mind that Jesus met him on the road.

1-2 – When we first met Saul, he was making havoc of the church in Jerusalem. Now, he begins to expand this work to the city of Damascus, some 120 mls northeast of Jerusalem. There was a large Jewish population in that city and, despite Saul's best efforts at destroying the church, the Gospel had already spread to Samaria and now apparently had a significant following as far north as Damascus, large enough to be concerned about. Its ironic how Luke just told us of Philip and the Ethiopian and how the Gospel was spreading to the south. Saul's worried about the Gospel spreading north. While he's trying to stamp out Christianity in one direction, God is steadily advancing it in another.

Note Saul's demeanor in **vs1**. It's a picture of an angry, violent man absolutely convinced of his own righteousness. This speaks to the amazing grace of Jesus towards sinners. Saul hated the followers of Jesus. He definitely wasn't seeking Jesus when Jesus was seeking him. You could even say that Saul had decided against Jesus when Jesus was decided for Saul. But this is true of everyone who comes to Christ for salvation. There's nothing in any of us that is deserving of His love and salvation – He loves us because He loves us and because He loves us, He saves us. It's not because of who we are or what we have to offer Him; it's because of who He is and what He has to offer us.

3-7 – First off, let me say that this spectacular event must be taken as highly

unusual, to say the least. God doesn't normally confront sinners with heavenly light and an audible voice from heaven. And what a light this was! Paul will later reveal that this happened around noontime and yet, he says that this light was brighter than the sun. So, when Luke tells us that Saul fell to the ground, understand that this was not done out of honor or reverence to God, this was merely a survival reaction – he was terrified of the heavenly light! Also, the rabbis of the day believed God no longer spoke directly to man as He did in the days of the prophets. Saul learned that one could hear God directly.

Saul, Saul – When God repeats a name, it's to display a deep emotion but not necessarily anger. Think of the tone in Jesus' voice when He said, "Martha, Martha" or when He wept over, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." Though His tone may have been loving here too, what He said to Saul must have rocked him to his core! "Why are you persecuting Me?" This statement was a complete shock to Saul's intellectual world! Less than 60 seconds before this, Saul was 100% sure of himself. Now, with just a bright light and a simple question, Saul's belief system has been turned upside down and now he knows he has been completely wrong about everything.

Unless Saul was hallucinating, the appearance of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus proved 2 very important things: that Jesus is alive and if alive, it also proved that He is God! Worse than that, Saul now discovers that it is this very living, very divine Jesus that he's been persecuting all this time. He is finally confronted with the true nature of his crime: instead of faithfully serving the God of Israel, he was viscerally persecuting his own Messiah!

But, despite just realizing that his entire religious life was based on a lie and his current religious activities were an affront to the very God he claimed to serve, Saul still had the presence of mind to ask 2 very important questions. 1) "Who are You, Lord?" and 2) "Lord, what would You have me to do?" These are 2 of the most important questions anyone can and must ask of God. Most people have plenty of questions they would like to ask of God. A Gallup Survey from the '90s asked people to list the 3 questions they would most like to ask God. The top 5 responses were: 1. "Will there ever be lasting world peace?" 2. "How can I be a better person?" 3. "What does the future hold for my family and me?" 4. "Will there ever be a cure for all diseases?" 5. "Why is there suffering in the world?" It's odd that they would want to ask God these questions since they're already answered in the

Bible. Clearly, these aren't the most important questions but Saul asked the right ones.

Who are You, Lord? When Saul asked this question, he did so with a broken, humbled heart. We must ask this question with the same heart and we must ask it to the same God. If you're inquiring just for the sake of information, you'll never get down to the reality of God. A true knowledge of God cannot possibly exist in the mind alone – it must also invade the heart. Jesus came to this earth to show us exactly who God is and what God is like and it's only by a consistent study of God's Word that He can fully answer this question. This is a life-long task. In fact, Although Saul understood exactly Who was speaking to him (the ascended Jesus of Nazareth needs no further identification) he still spent the rest of his life wanting to know more completely the answer to this question ([Phil 3:10](#))

What would You have me to do? Few people ever dare to really ask God this question but if you are willing to receive the answer to the first question then it's the only logical question that can follow. Once you get a sense of Who God is and you compare that to who you are, it's obvious that God's revealing Himself to you for a reason, for a purpose and it would behoove us to discover what that reason and purpose actually is. Saul immediately realized how wrong, how evil he had actually been towards Jesus, this Jesus who was also God. Now, if Jesus was out for justice, He would have eliminated Saul on the spot. The fact that Saul was still breathing forced him to connect the dots and realize that this meeting was an extension of divine grace; it meant he was alive for a reason: to serve a purpose.

Have you connected those dots yet? If you have been wonderfully saved by the blood of Jesus Christ then you must realize that you are still here for a reason and a purpose. Do you know what that purpose is? Do you want to know? When you ask God this question, you must ask it as Saul did: with a submissive heart and a determined obedience. There's no place for testing the water to see if it's right for you. No, the only valid response to the revelation of God's purpose for your life is obedience. That's really the only correct motivation for even asking the question – to discover in order to obey. To seek God's will and then cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He works to fulfill that will in and through your life. It is literally the only reason we are still walking around on this earth!

the goads – This statement from Jesus is actually a small parable of sorts concerning Saul and his previous life. A goad was a long, sharp stick that was used by a farmer to get an ox moving in the direction he wanted when plowing. He would jab the hind legs of the ox with the goad until it cooperated. In this parable, Saul was the ox and Jesus was the farmer. Saul was stupid and stubborn but still valuable and potentially extremely useful to the Master's service. Jesus was goading Saul in the right direction which caused Saul pain. Instead of submitting to Jesus, Saul kicked against the goads – which caused more pain. This was an exercise in futility on Saul's part; his resistance was futile!

You might be offended that God would compare us to oxen and truly, it is an unfair comparison. I mean, what ox has ever rebelled against God to the extent that we humans have? If God was going to apologize, it would be to the ox!

Though Saul is being confronted with the futility of his sin by this parable, note the love Jesus displays at the beginning of His statement: It is hard for you. Jesus was the one being persecuted. It was His people who were being arrested and imprisoned and forced to blaspheme and even sacrifice their lives. Jesus was the one being sinned against, being offended by Saul's stubborn, vicious hatred and yet, the Lord's concern was for the effect this hatred had on Saul. Jesus knew that all the while Saul was fighting against Him that his own conscience was fighting back, keeping him up at night, filling his mind with fear and doubt – his hatred was eating him up, destroying him. It is the tender heart of Jesus who looks past the offense and is concerned for the lasting damage of sin.

True to form, in answering his question, Jesus simply gave Saul the first step – go into the city. Now, his companions saw the light and heard the noise of God's voice but they were still in the dark. This theophany was only for Saul but, as we will see next week, Saul wasn't the only person in the area that God had to deal with in a special way. There was another heart that had to be broken but this one would not require such drastic measures.

Saul made some wonderful discoveries that day. He discovered that Jesus is alive and this meant he had to change his mind about Jesus and His message. If Jesus is alive, it means He's God and if He's God then Saul had to repent.

He now realized he was a lost sinner in danger of judgment. Compared to the holiness of Jesus, all of Saul's good works looked like filthy rags, they were worthless. Saul discovered that something had to give and it did. He did – he gave up his self-righteousness, he gave up trying to fight Jesus, he gave up trying to live his own life by his own rules because he wasn't doing anything but slowly killing himself and sending himself to an eternity in hell and torment. What happened when Saul finally gave all this up? All of his values changed. Everything he thought was important became pointless and everything he had dedicated his life to destroying became important to him. He was a new person because he was now believing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

So, this Hebrew of the Hebrews would eventually become the Apostle to the Gentiles; this vicious persecutor would become a passionate preacher; this legalistic Pharisee would become the great proclaimer of the grace of God. Saul was on his way to arrest followers of Jesus when Jesus arrested him. He had to lose his religion before he could gain the righteousness of Christ. Though his conversion experience is unique in the church age, it's an example of how Israel will be saved when Jesus returns and reveals Himself to them.

His salvation is also a great encouragement to any lost sinner because if the chief of sinners could be saved, then anybody can be saved! 😊