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The Surrendered Heart

Acts 9:8-31

Intro: Last week we began our study of ch9 by looking at the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. By this time, he had made quite a name for himself as a persecutor of any who claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We spent some time looking at Saul's background, his education, his religious training in Jerusalem, in order to gain some insight as to why he was such a determined and persistent persecutor. His entire belief system, which flowed from his in-depth understanding of Judaism and its ancient traditions, stood in stark opposition to what the followers of Jesus claimed about their Lord. We also saw that, not only was Saul fighting against the Christian church, he was also fighting against his own conscience, his memory of the witness of Stephen: his knowledge and application of the Scriptures, his mercy in praying for his executioners and his peace and unshakable confidence in the face of a horrible death.

Instead of Saul's conscience tempering his hatred of the followers of Jesus, it actually stoked the fire and made him even more determined to nip this new sect in the bud. Of course, all his efforts were of no avail. God had a plan for His church and He was fulfilling that plan despite Saul's best efforts. In fact, God had a special plan for Saul and that special plan required a special confrontation. On his way to Damascus, the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, appeared to him personally and this appearance turned Saul's world upside down. He was immediately confronted by how sincerely wrong he'd been about almost everything up to this point in his life. This revelation left Saul devastated and broken.

So, on the road to Damascus, Saul met Jesus and the confrontation changed his life forever, as it should everyone. But, while Jesus was the most important person Saul will meet on this trip, He isn't the only person Saul will meet in Damascus. And, Saul's wasn't the only heart that Jesus will need to bend to His will.

8-9 – If we take the experience of Saul from **vs3-6** and combine it with **vs8-9**, the first thing we should take from this is that a dramatic encounter with heaven is not always a pleasant experience! So many people have the idea

that, in the midst of the wreck they have made of their lives, if they just had the opportunity to give God a piece of their mind, they could get Him straightened out and He would fix the mess they have made. They fail to realize that standing before God in a state of open rebellion against Him and His Word is not a good idea. They'd be better off sticking a butter knife into an electric socket. It would probably be less painful.

Too many people suffer from the delusion that God owes them something: peace, prosperity, an easier life; and they feel justified in demanding these things and slighted by God when they don't receive them. They believe God owes them an audience to air all their grievances but they wouldn't enjoy the time as much as they think they would. One thing the OT teaches us - with all of its religious rituals and regulations - is that God is so holy; He is unapproachable by sinful humanity. The Bible even says that God dwells in unapproachable light. If that's true, how could anyone ever come to Him? How could they ever approach Him? They can only come to Him in the way He prescribes.

In order to enter into God's presence one must first go through the door of repentance. That was probably the most traumatic part of Saul's meeting with Jesus. For the first time in his life, as someone who was guiltless concerning the Law, Saul had to repent and that was a difficult thing for a self-righteous Pharisee to do. It is difficult for anyone to do but – IT MUST BE DONE! True repentance is the evidence of saving faith, which is the key to eternal salvation and the blessings of God on your life. In order to receive His blessings, you must put yourself in the place of blessing and that begins with repentance. Saul was coming to grips with this reality and it only took 3 days of dying to himself!

10-12 – Who is this guy, Ananias? We really don't know. We know nothing about him or his life before he met with Saul or after. We don't know how he came to be in Damascus and we don't know what happened to him later. All Luke tells us about him is that he was a certain disciple – an average follower of Jesus. I find that to be encouraging because Ananias was just an ordinary guy in the church. He wasn't an Apostle, prophet, pastor, evangelist or elder. He wasn't even a deacon; he was an regular believer and that's why God used him. If an Apostle or other prominent leader had ministered to Saul, people could say that Paul's gospel had come from man and not Jesus Himself.

God needs to use those certain disciples – like you and me. He has a special work for us to do. You might not think yourself capable of being used much but honestly, there are people in your life that no one else in this church will ever meet or ever influence for the Gospel. How many times in the Bible have we seen God use ordinary things in extraordinary ways? He used Adam's rib to create Eve. He used Moses' staff to part the Red Sea. He used 300 men armed with only clay pots and torches to defeat an innumerable army of Midianites. He used a lowly Israelite slave girl to convince Naaman the Syrian to visit Elisha the prophet. God used Ananias because He loves to include His people in His work and Ananias was a willing servant. His life was completely surrendered to doing God's will.

Notice the difference in the way God spoke to Ananias and the way He spoke to Saul. Saul had a bold, almost violent confrontation with God but Ananias heard the voice of God sweetly in a vision where God called to him and Ananias responded obediently. "Hear I am, Lord" is the perfect and only appropriate response to God's call. Saul had responded with some initial resistance and questioning. That's to be expected; his heart was not fully surrendered at that time. But, we should expect every disciple of Jesus to receive God's Word like Ananias did. We might not often hear directly from God in a vision but we can hear directly from Him daily as we read and study His Word. The truths and principles found there are for our instruction and benefit and should be received with a trusting obedience.

Also, in Ananias' case, the vision from God was very specific (11-12). This specificity was necessary and important because God was asking Ananias to do something bold and potentially dangerous in meeting with Saul, the great persecutor. Ananias would need confirmation along the way that God was actually guiding him and God gave him definite ways to confirm His guidance and direction. But even in spite of all this, Ananias still sought clarification.

13-16 – It seems Ananias had already heard that this angry, violent persecutor – Saul of Tarsus – was on his way to Damascus. In fact, he knew a great deal about Saul's mission. Apparently, the believers in Jerusalem got wind of his intentions and sent word to the church there. Clearly, they made better time than Saul's party did. The disciples there must have anxiously prepared for the coming persecution. So, to our eyes and ears, Ananias'

objections seem perfectly logical and well founded but are they really? From our human perspective, we understand his misgivings about this but what does it look like from the divine perspective? It would seem in this case, Ananias presumed that God needed some instruction in this matter, or at least some counsel! It's almost as if he's saying, "Hold up God, let me tell you what I've heard about this man." Or, he's questioning, "God, do you know who this guy really is?"

I think this was the real question in Ananias' heart because that's the question God answers in His response, "Sure, I know who he is. He's a chosen vessel..." God had a call on Saul's life and at this particular time, He hadn't revealed that call to Saul, but He revealed it to Ananias. God considered Saul His chosen vessel long before there appeared anything worthy in Saul to choose. God knew what He would make of Saul even if Saul didn't know it and Ananias couldn't see it. Their limited knowledge didn't limit God's plan or His power in any way.

This is important for us to remember, too. In our lives, there are things that we "hear" and there are things that God "knows." Our attitude, our confidence, our peace in this Christian walk is going to be either shaken or established by one of these two things. Of the 2, which one is more accurate? What God knows will always be more accurate than what I've heard or what I think I may know about a certain person or situation. How much of our worry and fretting in this life comes from us believing the things we "hear" and how much of that could be dispensed with if we would simply trust in what God knows? We live in confusing and fretful times but God knows our situation and He knows what we need. He sees everything as it happens and knows what tomorrow will bring. He's got this – just trust Him!

18-22 – Ananias' faith was strong enough to believe God and do what He said, trusting Him for the consequences. If God said Saul was converted, he was willing to believe it. Thus convinced, he wasted no time in going to the house of Judas and ministering to the waiting Saul. Saul couldn't see Ananias but he heard the love in his voice when he called him "Brother" and he felt the comfort of his touch when he laid his hands on him and Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit. This was the point of Saul's conversion; this was when he was born again into the family of God.

When Saul was born again, 3 things happened to confirm his conversion to

the saints in Damascus. 1) He received his sight again. When he finally accepted the message of the Gospel, something akin to scales fell from his eyes – like opaque contact lenses. At the same time, the blinders were removed from his spiritual eyes and for the first time in his life he could see the truth! 2) He was baptized. He immediately wanted to identify with Jesus and the disciples of Jesus by being baptized. When his eyes were opened – he went looking for water. 3) He began to preach. Saul didn't know all there was to know about the Christian faith but he knew enough to share the Gospel with others and he did it quite effectively. At first the people were *amazed* that the former persecutor of Jesus was now preaching Jesus. Then they went from being amazed to being confounded, Saul baffled the Jews because he could explain both *what* he believed and *why* he believed it.

Saul's initial message consisted of the dual truths that 1) Jesus is the Son of God and 2) Jesus is the Messiah. These may seem like simple topics but they are actually profound. Saying Jesus is the Son of God wasn't merely a simple platitude in that day, Paul was persecuted because of it. All spiritual knowledge is based on the identity of Jesus Christ as God. If Jesus is the Son of God, then Jesus is God. God does no wrong; thus, Jesus does no wrong. Everything Jesus says can be trusted. If He says God is a certain way, we can believe it because He is God Himself and speaks the truth. If He says the Bible can be trusted, that it comes from God, that it will never pass away, then we can trust the Bible. Nearly everything we know of spiritual things is based on the truth: "Jesus is the Son of God."

Paul also preached that Jesus is the Messiah. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah. Both words means "anointed" and when referring to a specific individual, they mean "the Anointed One" the one promised in the OT as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. So, if Saul was going to prove that Jesus is the Christ, he had to go back to the OT promises and show that Jesus was the One God promised would redeem His people. In the OT, people were only anointed for 3 specific functions: prophet, priest and king. Jesus is the last and greatest of the prophets and since He is the Messiah, He is the final word from God to man. He's the one who teaches us what God is like. Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek but instead of offering animal sacrifices for sin, He offered Himself, the only truly adequate sacrifice for human sin. He offered Himself once as the perfect sacrifice forever. Jesus is king. David was regarded as

Israel's greatest king but he eventually grew old and died. Jesus rose from the dead to live and reign forever.

23-25 – Jesus and Ananias weren't the only ones Saul met in Damascus, he also met opposition to His calling. Luke tells us that the Jews plotted to kill Saul "after many days." How many? Well, it seems quite a few. After his initial preaching stint in Damascus, Paul tells us in Galatians that he spent some time in Arabia. We don't know exactly what he was doing there but most likely, he was contemplating his new faith and studying Scripture in preparation for his new calling. But, upon his return to Damascus, it seems the Jews had had enough of his uncontested spiritual logic and they decided that if they couldn't beat him, they would just kill him. But, the disciples in the city found out about the plot and snuck Saul out in a basket. He had been led into Damascus like a blind man and now he had to be smuggled out like a common criminal. Not the kind of reception you hope for from your preaching.

Saul enjoyed a divine protection over his life until his ministry for the Lord was fully completed. This was the first of many escapes for Paul but there were also times when he didn't escape. Sometimes he was caught, imprisoned, even beaten. It turns out that he had to suffer quite a few things for the sake of his Lord and Savior. Persecution from unbelievers, while difficult, is to be expected – especially with the message he was carrying. But, there was another type of persecution that had to be very painful – being shunned and feared by other believers.

26-30 – Imagine that – 3 years after his conversion, after being baptized and preaching the Gospel, after spending time alone with Jesus in Arabia, after being such a problem for the Jews that they wanted to kill him, the Christians in Jerusalem were still so suspicious of him that they didn't want to have anything to do with him! They simply didn't believe that he was a disciple. I'm sure this had to hurt but still, Saul knew they were remembering all the Christians he had killed and persecuted back in the day. Thankfully, Barnabas was there to welcome him into the church with simple friendship and love.

It was Barnabas who helped the Jerusalem saints to accept Saul. He brought Saul in and convinced the church leaders that he was both a believer and a chosen Apostle. He stayed with Peter for about 15 days but it

wasn't long before Saul got himself into more trouble. He started speaking boldly in the name of Jesus and even tried his hand at disputing with the Hellenist, a group he was intimately familiar with. He must have did pretty well because, in the end, they wanted to kill him too! When the church discovered this plot, they rushed him off to Tarsus. It's ironic that the story of Saul's conversion begins with him leaving Jerusalem to persecute the followers of Jesus and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a persecuted follower of Jesus.

Saul left Jerusalem for Tarsus and 10-12 years would before he would enter into any prominent ministry again. He would be sent out as a missionary from the church in Antioch. At that time, it would be Barnabas again who reaches out to Saul, remembering him and loving him in the Lord.

31 – Luke shows us here that despite the determined opposition that came against it, God's work in and through the church not only continued but it was strong! The Book of Acts mentions nothing about the planting of churches in Galilee. We don't know who started them, how they did it or the marvelous work the god did in these young churches. All we can tell is that the message of the Gospel was going out just as the Lord had commanded. Soon, the center of Christianity would be in Antioch, not Jerusalem and the key leader would be Paul, not Peter; and the Gospel will be carried to the uttermost parts of the world. God changes His workmen but His work goes on unabated.

peace – This doesn't mean the persecution stopped, it simply means the church had peace in the midst of the persecution. This was not a time of complacency, because the church was growing spiritually and numerically. They did so because they were walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Both of these are needed in the Christian walk. At any given time a follower of Jesus may need more of either one. Often times the Lord allows the comfortable to be afflicted (to gain the fear of the Lord) and the afflicted to be comforted (by the comfort of the Holy Spirit).

Thank God for willing servants like Ananias and Barnabas. Their role in Saul's conversion reminds us that God looks for willing servants to cooperate with Him in the conversion and discipling of others, even when they are not really necessary. They still can serve as a demonstration of the importance of the family of God. Their hearts, their minds and their wills

were submissive to the will of God, meaning – they were aligned with the will of God. Are we? Are we in the place of being useful for the work of the kingdom? 😊