

Blinded By The Light...

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 9:1-19



Our reading today describes one of the most dramatic u-turns in history, certainly one that has had the most enduring legacies within the sphere of world religions.

We start with a glorious day on the road between two cities. Picture the scene. The sun is shining, the road ahead shimmers in the heat. Even the bandits are basking in the sun, willing to allow travellers to go about their business in relative safety, much to the relief of a certain Samaritan who is still to settle his bill with a certain hotelier on the outskirts of Jericho. But this is a different route, with this road leading to the city of Damascus.

There are many travellers on the road, going about their business or making their way between cities to visit relatives. Carts laden with livestock and slaves trundle along the way, the beasts pulling them belaboured by the whips of their drivers, who are even now day-dreaming of the amphora of wine awaiting them at journey's end.

Soldiers are marching along the road, that relentless movement of one garrison to swap with another, seemingly at the whim of the general. Grumbling is usually frowned upon in the mighty Roman army, but there are few who would blame the complaints of those who are forced to change camp on such a hot day. Not that they get a lot of sympathy from the locals, mind you.

It's a good day for a persecution, if you are that way inclined. Dotted along the road are the grisly reminders of the fate that awaits the careless bandit, the unwary criminal, and the incautious heretic. The

carrion birds are feasting, their cries punctuating the rumble of wheels, clump of boots and curses of those who forget that bovine transport likes to leave its mark on the road at regular intervals.

One group of people claim our attention; a man in fine robes accompanied by some acolytes, walking with as much purpose as the heat will allow. At least the man's face is set in a determined expression, though the sweat keeps getting into his eyes. Packed away safely among the meagre luggage the party are carrying is a vital document. Inscribed in glorious detail is the permission for the arrest, imprisonment, even execution of that rabble of troublemakers, known locally as "The Followers of the Way."

Saul is on a mission, with deadly intent. Having overseen the death of more than one of these thorns in his flesh, he is keen to extend his project to bring this irritating new sect to a swift and terminal close. Having swept through Jerusalem, he has heard reports that the group has scattered across the locality, so he's off to Damascus to root out any newcomers who bear the characteristics of this group. Their generosity and grace should betray them...

But then, boom! Halted in his tracks, Saul is sent stumbling to the ground by a light even more glaring than the sun that was enjoying a busy day bleaching the bones along the roadside. Dotting around him like a frenzied electrical storm, the light dances on his prostrate body, blinding him one moment, then playing around his feet and ankles the next.

Confused and petrified, his companions look on, equally dazzled by the lights but unable to force their bodies into action, leaving Saul a lone body on the dusty road, helpless and vulnerable.

A voice from nowhere yet everywhere asks Saul about his mission and its intent. "Why do you persecute me?"

Revealing his identity as Jesus, the very name that Saul has vowed to extinguish along with his followers, the following instructions may seem puzzling. Why not wreak revenge on this poor wretch lying in the road whose hands are tainted by the blood of the martyrs? Why not take some of that light, add a few volts, and start singeing the one who approved of Stephen's death and the many who didn't get out of Jerusalem quickly enough?

But no, the voice of Jesus has other plans for Saul. Get up and finish the journey. But instead of heading to the synagogue to hand over the arrest warrants, Saul makes for a privately owned house in what I hope is literally named Straight Street (I also hope that it's just round the corner from Wonky Way, but that may not be historically accurate).

Saul regained his feet but not his sight and had to be led by his dazed and confused travelling companions who took the change of destination in their stride.

And now for the true miracle. A chap called Ananias, whose name goes through its own redemption, is tasked by God to visit Saul. Gulp. Saul, who Ananias has heard all about and is probably wondering if he ought to flee Damascus before the killing starts. Saul, the slayer of folk like Ananias and last heard of breathing threats as he stalked the streets of Jerusalem.

Yes, that Saul. Not the Saul of that dreadful past, but a different Saul, one with a hope-filled and glorious future. Saul, who will be the voice of Christ to all, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Ananias acts in faith (and fear) and heads off to Straight Street. Now that is a step of faith. I'm not sure that I would be too keen to do what Ananias did, to place myself in such potential danger, knowing that if I had misheard I would be signing my own arrest, even death, warrant.

But the welcome at the house is not a deadly embrace and the slam of a prison cell. Rather, Paul is

released from his own captivity, as his sight is restored as Ananias lays hands on him. Paul is baptised and eats for the first time in three days.

So, what about us? What nuggets can we glean from this amazing story of redemption and grace, of faith and obedience?

There are certainly a couple of things we can take away. For a start, there may well be some of us who feel that the things we've done in the past (or even present) mean that God surely can't love us. There may even be some of us who have heard plenty of times about this thing called "grace" but feel that it isn't for us. We've done too much, said too much, loved too little.

Well, as Ian Hislop might say, have I got news for you. Saul was in love with his law, but it was a restrictive and destructive law. Saul did things that few others would dare to do, and usually a custodial sentence would follow if you tried doing it in England today. But still God loved him enough to offer him grace. In spite of Saul, Jesus saves. And because of Jesus, Saul was saved.

That may be enough for you. It's certainly enough for God. I hope and pray that, if you have ever doubted God's loving grace, Saul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus will show that you have a future in God, irrespective of your past. The scars of the past may still need to be borne, just as the scars on Jesus hands and feet were evident to all who met him after his resurrection. But scars are a reminder of the past, not a defining of the future. Your future is secure in the one who Saul persecuted, then followed.

And then there's the lesson of Ananias. A man who took a risky step, to dare to go into the lion's den and discover not a roaring king of the beasts, but a meek kitten. There would be no future for Saul without Ananias and the writings that have shaped so much of Christian thinking may never have been recorded. Ananias's place in Christian history is much-overlooked, but that's the way God likes to do things. It's these acts of faith that resonate most in the Kingdom of Heaven, as we see it touch earth. What is God asking you to do with him today?

Amen.

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