

TITLE: The Enemy welcomed in
VERSE: Act 9
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Know your Enemy

Most of us would know Saul by his other name - Paul. The apostle wrote many of the letters to churches in the NT. Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his equivalent Latin name.

Came from a city called Tarsus, just off the coast of the Mediterranean now-a-days part of Turkey. It was an important stopping off point for traders and was therefore the focal point for many different cultures. The Roman Empire had a key presence there during this time.

As a city, it was known for it's high intellectual environment - the residents were well educated and versed in the latest thinking of the day. No surprise then, that Saul was very intelligent.

Born around 5AD, Saul followed a similar path as his father, in becoming a Pharisee and was trained under one the most respected Rabbi's of the day - Gamaliel. Under Gamaliel, Saul was thoroughly trained in how to observe the traditions and written laws of Moses.

Saul tells us himself later in Galatians that he was excelling in all that he was being trained in. To the point where he was advancing far more quickly than any of his peers who were of the same age.

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Gal 1: 4

He was able to uphold and argue some of the finer details of the laws and traditions with in depth knowledge and understanding. He enthusiastic, super-keen, passionate - even obsessive and extreme. He was not a man to be matched!

He was the sort of guy, if he were taking his GSCE's or A-Levels or final exams for degree or diplomas or just about to take his Phd Viva - he would be assured to get A*'s across the board, first class honours and distinctions galore. Basically, you wouldn't want to play against him in Trivial Pursuit!

We're first introduced to Saul in Chapter 7:

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He then fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

Acts 7: 58-60

Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen. He stood by and watched each stone being thrown. He heard the last words come from Stephen's mouth - asking for God to forgive those who were killing him.

He didn't watch as a bystander, he guarded the clothes of those that were doing the stoning - to make sure they didn't get dirty or any blood on them but he also stood there approving.

"...when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there and giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."

Acts 22:20

On that day, all of Saul's energy, enthusiasm and passion unleashed in him a fury against the early church. Seeing the destruction of the church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ became his obsession.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem...Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.
Acts 8: 1 & 3

I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.
Acts 22:4

None of the Christians were safe. Saul hunted them down, men and women - he wasn't bothered.

A little later on in Acts, when standing before King Agrippa (Acts 26), Saul described this time like this:

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.
Acts 26: 9-11

Not only was Saul rounding up the Christians, he was trying to get them to blaspheme, trying to get them to trip up. The punishment for blasphemy? Death. Saul wanted the Christians dead - not happy with them just being imprisoned. Never again did he want to hear of stories, parables, and miracles done in the name of Jesus Christ.

Why was he so against the church and Jesus Christ?

He was highly trained in the traditions and written laws. He had spent the majority of his life in training to become a Pharisee. Perhaps all of time and devotion Saul had put into his studying the law and the traditions had mentally and spiritually blinded him to the truth...

Jesus had scorned the Pharisees many times. Often challenging them to open their eyes and see the truth - rather than simply burying their heads and minds in their man-made traditions. Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites and exposed their true nature - they were more concerned with what they looked like from the outside rather than what was within their hearts.

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:
'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men'...

...They are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into the pit."
Matt 15:7-9 &14

For many years, the Pharisees had been the ones with the authority; they took control and exercised the laws and traditions as they saw them - not as how God had intended them to be. For many of them, including Saul, they took great pride in their position and in all they had done. Then Jesus came along and sheds light directly into their hypocrisy. Had anyone ever before spoken and challenged that Pharisees in such away? It was unlikely. Had anyone commented so openly on their way of living and the contradictions it brought to the written laws of Moses.

It's not so surprising then that there was such a hatred from the Pharisees towards the early Christians - people who had followed them, come to them for counsel and advice, listened to them preach and pray at the temple, now they seemed to be turning towards the way of Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees had imagined the issue would go away when Jesus died on the cross... now the followers were claiming Jesus had risen from the dead, people were repenting of their sins, being baptized and following the Way and it was spreading...

Someone needed to stop this before it got out of control - Saul stepped up and took on this responsibility. He was going from house to house, synagogue to synagogue in Jerusalem - hunting down all those who claimed to be following Jesus Christ.

The problem was that a number of the followers had fled the city after Stephen's stoning - they had gone to other towns and cities and were continuing to spread the word of Jesus Christ.

This only enraged Saul even more - it was not enough to only stop the new Christian's in Jerusalem; he had to go to all of the other places to root them out, imprison them and kill them.

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether man or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.
Acts 9:1-3

Saul had essentially been given jurisdiction to march into Damascus and arrest any Christian, bring them back to Jerusalem, to be imprisoned and tried, perhaps forced to blaspheme and killed.

Damascus is approximately 150 miles north of Jerusalem. It was a key city during these times as it was the hub for caravan trades, which stretched far and wide into North Syria, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Persia and Arabia. If the Christians were left in this city, the Pharisees feared the word of Jesus Christ would spread and reach all of these places other places. Saul needed to stop this happening immediately.

It would have taken Saul about a week to travel from Jerusalem to Damascus, during which time, word would have travelled Damascus, telling all that Saul was on his way and he had been given permission to arrest and imprison anyone who followed Jesus Christ.

The local Pharisees were probably elated! They didn't know what to do about the Christian's but now Saul, the man who has ruthlessly swept through Jerusalem and gotten rid of the Christians is now coming to do the same here.

The Christians also would have heard - Saul, the man who watched and approved of Stephen's stoning was coming to Damascus. The Christians are likely to have had friends and family who lived in Jerusalem who they had not heard from since Saul's rampage through the city - fearing that they were imprisoned or perhaps dead. Now he was coming to do the same here. I'm sure there would have been prayers from the followers at that time asking for God to respond to the their plight and save them from Saul's arrival.

Both the Pharisees and Christians in Damascus were probably waiting for that day with great anticipation, counting down the days, not quite knowing when Saul would arrive, when he would descend upon the synagogues, when he would be knocking on the front doors of the houses where Christians were known to meet..

But that day never came.

The Day it all changed

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him,
"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked
"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."
Acts 9: 3-4

We know from some later accounts that Paul gives, it was at about midday, when the sun is at it's brightest, that the flash of light came - it was brighter than the sun. So overwhelming that it knocked him off his feet.

Then came the voice. No question of who it was addressing: "Saul, Saul..." nor why it was speaking to him "...why do you persecute me?"

There must have been a huge gasp from Saul. He was speaking directly to Jesus - he wasn't dead, he was alive, just like the other Christians had been saying! Jesus knew him by name and what he had been doing.

Jesus also confirmed that to persecute his followers, was to persecute him.

When Saul is later recounting the story of his journey to Damascus to Agrippa he tells us a little more of what Jesus said to him:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."
Acts 26:14

It is hard for you to kick against the goads?

A goad was a traditional farming instrument used to prod or guide oxen when they were pulling a plough.

How often do we do the same - when we're doing something we know to be wrong, with the Holy Spirit prompting us, letting us know that it isn't the right thing to do, trying to lead us in the right direction, yet we try to ignore the prompts. We try to fight it. We kick against the goads.

There was a period of about a year before I became a Christian, where there were little prompts and guidance from what I now know to have been the Spirit leading me towards Jesus Christ. It's hard to explain but whilst I kind of knew where those prompts were coming from, I tried to ignore them, I didn't want to admit to them. During that year I came to university and so there were many pressures and temptations placed in front of me. Most of which, I failed. There was a lot of pride inside of me - wanting to retain control, wanting to do what I wanted to do.

Thankfully, Jesus kept on fighting for me - the Spirit kept on prodding me and leading me. In fact he went completely out of his way to make sure I couldn't get completely out of his way! One example was that it turned out that the two people who were my very good friends on my course, were both Christians and one of them was praying for me!

Perhaps the Holy Spirit had been prompting Saul over a period of time prior to this trip to Damascus about the truth yet Saul had been trying to resist, kicking at the goads, trying to ignore them. Perhaps Stephen's final prayer for God to forgive those throwing the stones had jolted something in his heart perhaps the commitment of those he hunted and imprisoned to remain true to the faith they had in Jesus - no matter what the cost.

Perhaps even before all of this, Saul may have met, seen or spoken to Jesus himself before his crucifixion. The bible does not give us any account of this but it would be certainly possible. Both Saul and Jesus were around the same age and they would have visited Jerusalem and the temple at the same time, for the same festivals. It's very likely that the young Pharisee Saul heard Jesus teaching - perhaps even when Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness! If they did not meet, certainly Saul would have known of Jesus and his teachings, miracles, character and claims - along with the rumours of him being raised from the dead.

But now Jesus had appeared to Saul in a way that could no longer be ignored. The road to Damascus was the climax of Jesus' prompting and goading. There was no uncertainty now!

Saul was not alone

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand to Damascus.
Acts 9:7-8

The men travelling with him were speechless. They had seen the light and heard the sound but not understood what was said.

When Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, he found that the light had blinded him.

The great Saul, who had probably expected to enter Damascus in the fullness of pride and prowess, a self-confident opponent to Christ, come to rid the city of his followers, a man of action and authority with his letters to the chief priests was actually led into it, completely humbled and blind, led by those he travelled with.

And when he got to Damascus - although blind did he continue to command his men to pursue and find out all the Christians? No:

For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.
Acts 9:9

Saul would have not been a stranger to fasting - going without food or drink. As part of his life as a Pharisee, he would have regularly fasted. In order for them to focus on prayer, the Pharisee would not eat or drink which would be seen as a distraction. Saul now wanted to spend every moment in praying.

Saul clearly had something important on his mind, something that he wanted to get right with God about - all of the sins he had committed, his self-righteousness, the persecution and killing of the followers of Christ. It was a time for getting things right with God.

It would have also been a time for worship - rather than "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" now he was singing out words of praise and glory to God.

Saul would have also been asking the Lord what was to happen next? What was he to do? How would the other followers of Jesus Christ respond to him - surely they wouldn't trust him or want to be near him after all the trouble he had caused? How was he going to be able to serve the Lord Jesus?...

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision "Ananias!"
"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."
Acts 9:10-12

Ananias: The Welcomer

Ananias has been referred to as "one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian Church." (William Barclay).

He is an ordinary man - just like you and me. He knows about Saul - he's heard the stories. So when the Lord gives him instructions to go to Saul, well, he thinks this can't be right...?

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."
Acts 9:13-14

How often has God told us what to do in a situation but the fear of doing it or the consequences it might bring come straight to the front of our mind? It was the same for Ananias - God wanted him to go to Saul...? But surely that was pretty much like just handing himself into the nearest prison "Hi, I'm Ananias, follower of the Lord Jesus Christ - which cell do you want me in?"

Ananias is understandably a little uncertain but the Lord replies:

"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their Kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he has to suffer for my name."
Acts 9:15-16

So Ananias grabs his coat and goes to the house of Judas in Straight Street.

Incidentally, Straight Street is still in Damascus - it's pretty straight and is still a street!

Ananias' mind must have been racing on the walk over to Judas' house - what was he going to say to Saul, what would Saul's reaction be, what about the men he would be travelling with? So many questions. His mind might have been on Stephen's stoning, thoughts of Jesus...dying on the cross... Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit being with us... our guide and our peace... he's standing outside the door to Judas' house... deep breath... KNOCK KNOCK... "Who's there?"... "Ananias" (this isn't a joke!)

Suddenly door opens and Ananias is brought in side. There in the room is man, who looks tired and exhausted, he is blind and cannot see Ananias. Ananias walks over to him and places his hand son him:

"Brother Saul"

These may have been the first words Saul heard from the lips of a Christian following his conversion. Can you imagine - They must have been music to Saul's ears... the persecutor of the church, the man who approved of the stoning of Stephen... the hunter and the enemy... now a Brother - a member of the family.

"Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The vision that Saul had received for the Lord had come true - a man named Ananias had come to restore his sight. The Lord had remained faithful to His word.

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Acts 9:17-19

Saul's eyes had been opened - he was no longer physically or spiritually blind.

Interestingly, we're told later in Acts when Saul recounts the story that Ananias was a devout following of the law and a highly respected man amongst the Jews (Acts 22:12-14).

How appropriate that the first Christian that Saul met with, shared his story from the road to Damascus and all that he had been through since then - physically and spiritually - was a man who knew the laws of Moses, just as Saul did, and was respected amongst the Jews for his knowledge, wisdom and judgement. Ananias, although ordinary, was the ideal welcomer for Saul into the family of Christ. You can just imagine the conversations they would have been having over the table!

In the following verses we're told how Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. They must have been amazed - how could this man, THIS MAN, have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

"Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on His name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"

Acts 9:21

Of course - it was only human for them to question, to doubt, just as Ananias had done. But as the days went on, Saul continued to grow in more and more powerful.

When he went into the synagogues, rather than arresting the followers of Christ, he was telling everyone about Jesus and how he was the Christ.

The Jews and I'm sure the Pharisees who had hoped Saul had come to rid them of the Christians were completely baffled!

Saul did not stay in Damascus for long - Saul tells us in Galatians that he went immediately to Arabia. Why did he go to Arabia?

John Stott:

...He needed time to be quiet, and that Jesus now revealed to him those distinctive truths of Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ, which he would later call 'the mystery made known to me by revelation'

Saul's letter to the Galatians:

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were the apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days.
Galatians 1:1-18

The Persecutor becomes the Persecuted

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him,
Acts 9:23

On Saul's return to Damascus after his time in Arabia, the Jews began to turn against him - and plotted to arrest him and kill him.

Sure enough, they were going to use similar techniques and methods that he would have used three years earlier to get him to blaspheme and so kill him.

And yet Saul continued to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone - fearlessly and boldly.

Two responses for us:

1. Individually: Where are you currently with Christ?

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life
1 Timothy 1:15-16

Do you think you're too bad for God? He wouldn't accept you after all the things you've done or said or think. Why would he want a sinner like you? Well as Paul later tells us - Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - like me, you and like Paul. He came and saved Paul despite of all the things he had done. Christ's mercy and grace set Paul free from all of those things when he accepted Jesus into his life. He was liberated.

Has the Holy Spirit been prodding or goading you to put something right? If so, I urge you to respond this morning - stop kicking!

2. As Church:

Paul was welcomed into the fellowship of the church. If had not been for Ananias, who overcame his concerns and hesitations, and trusted in the Lord and welcoming Saul not as the man who had hunted, imprisoned and killed many Christians, not as an eternal enemy, but he welcoming him simply, openly, full-heartedly as his Brother.

This is certainly a clear message for us today - in a city such as Birmingham with people of different religious, ethnic or social backgrounds. In being apart of the Crown Church, a church which is striving to be a church made up of many nationalities, backgrounds and languages - reflecting and affecting our community.

We need to have the heart of Ananias so that we can welcome the Saul's of this community - demonstrating the grace and love of Jesus Christ.