

Paul in Damascus Acts 9:20-31 (18.07.2010)

Last week Gavin talked about Saul (who changed his name to Paul – the Gentile version of his name)

Saul was a zealous Jewish Pharisee, who may have even been present as the Jewish leaders condemned Jesus to death.

Whether or not he was there, he definitely took up the role of being one of the main ‘enforcers’ for the Jews – sent down to check that Stephen’s stoning was done in accordance with Jewish Law. And so he stood there, overseeing the execution, and watching the clothes of those stoning him.

The closest modern example of this religious zeal is probably the Taliban, or possibly the Nazis hunting down the Jews in the Second World War – and Paul described what his Pharisees (and therefore what he) had been like in Romans 10 it says this:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. (Romans 10:1-3)

So Saul was zealous, convinced of his righteousness, although it was man-made and without any of God’s Mercy in it; and without any real knowledge of God. And what that led to was him actively persecuting the church; and when it talks about a wave of persecution, Saul was behind it.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But 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)

And once he had done a thorough job in Jerusalem, he headed towards Damascus to hunt down those who had escaped

And as Gavin told us last week, on the way to make more arrests and see more Christians executed, he encountered the Risen Jesus and his whole life was changed.

He went physically blind, and then was healed, filled with the Holy Spirit and welcomed into the Church by Ananias, and then carried onto Damascus.

Now in Damascus, the Jews were waiting for this powerful, zealous persecutor of Christians to arrive, but when he did, it wasn't as they were expecting:

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:20-22)

You can imagine both the Christians and the Jews watching him, thinking 'what's going on?' 'Is it a trick?' 'Has he got some plan?'

But after some time, it became clear that his change was genuine and people were turning to Jesus because of him:

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. (Acts 9:23-25)

So Saul headed back down to Jerusalem:

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with

the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

So Saul, this amazing trophy of God's Grace, is sent back to his home town and for a time the wave of persecution that Saul had been stirring up, stopped for a time.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. (Acts 9:26-31)

So what happened next to Saul? The next time we hear about him is a couple of chapters later:

Now those who had been **scattered by the persecution** in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and **Antioch**, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and **a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and **they sent Barnabas** to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:19-26)

Acts, as we have said covers a period of 29 or 30 years, which isn't obvious from reading it through.

It's easy to get the impression that Saul is saved on the Damascus Road, and then, straight away – just one or two chapters later, he is rocketing into ministry as a missionary; But it wasn't like that. The period of time covered between these two mentions of Saul is about 7 years.

I find it amazing that someone as 'famous' as Saul would just vanish into obscurity and be hidden for such a long time. Surely to have such a brilliant man, who is well-connected and persuasive and amazingly intelligent and influential, and such a clear example of God's Grace – surely he should have been right at the front, preaching!

But wonderfully, with Saul, as with most other key men and women in the Bible, God doesn't just launch people into doing things without preparing them first.

Saul had these 7 hidden years where he was, as far as we know, just a member of the church in Tarsus, and then, if we read on, he had more years – probably another 9 when he was part of the leadership team in another church in Antioch – and then more years where he was Barnabas' helper – up to Acts 13:7; and then gradually God brings him to a place of responsibility and by Acts 13:42 (probably after another year had passed) it talks about 'Paul and Barnabas'

So from his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the Damascus road, until he was fully released into the ministry that God had called him to right on the day he surrendered to Jesus – ["This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."](#) (Acts 9:15) – Some 18 years had passed.

This was a time where although it was mainly hidden, God was at work!

This was his training time in God's Hand. And at the end of it there was a difference between Saul the Pharisee, who would have "been zealous for God, but not known Him or been changed by His Righteousness"; 18 years on, he was a man who was zealous for God, but also knew Him – "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings" who fully knew the emptiness of his own righteousness, but reveled in God's Free Gift of Righteousness through Jesus.

Through the Bible God never cuts corners with people – people always come before ministry or position to God.

He takes all the time He wants to and needs to in preparing us.

And as He prepares us, nothing is wasted – He is at work in good times, and actually, often He is at work even more through bad times.

And where we are impatient and want to get on with things, God isn't worried about the time it takes – He is preparing us for Eternity!

So if we feel life is taking a long time, we are in good company!

- We know very little of **Jesus'** first 30 years, and then He ministered for 3 years.
- **Moses** spent 40 years in obscurity as a shepherd – learning to trust God with sheep so that he would be ready for his 40 years shepherding God's People.

Terry Virgo, who leads Newfrontiers preached once about being an arrow for God.

He described all the preparation an arrow goes through – coming from being a **branch** on a tree to being stripped and **smoothed down**, and then getting a sharp **point** and **feathers** to keep it in the same direction...and then, after all this work, it is just **put in a bag to wait until it is needed**.

I know several people who maybe feel like someone has pressed the "Pause" button at the moment.

People who set out in ministry and things have gone slower than expected – you thought you'd be further on by now.

Life circumstances – jobs; redundancies; illness; young families – all mean that the dreams you had feel far away.

Different situations we are in/have been through that we maybe feel have disqualified us or caused us to be overlooked.

The truth is that right now God is at work in each of our lives; some of us are maybe resisting Him – others feel forgotten and can't see much evidence at all of God's Presence and work.

I guess there were times when Saul felt very far away in Tarsus – and because of what He had done, maybe he felt he deserved that. Maybe there were times when he just couldn't see the connection between his everyday life in Tarsus and the Call that Jesus had given him.

But at just the right time, God pulled him out of the quiver (the arrow-bag) and sent him out.

After 7 years of being hidden, Barnabas arrived to call Saul back in and help with the last part of his training.

Maybe Barnabas had had him on his mind through the seven years; maybe God spoke directly and clearly to him; maybe it was just circumstances – Tarsus was just a bit further on than Antioch and he was in the area!

Humanly speaking we don't know; but from God's view, it was just at the right time – so he sent Barnabas; his real name was Joseph, but he had been given this nickname – “Son of encouragement”

➔ He had set the standard for the Church by his generosity – selling property and laying it at the apostles' feet; he had been the first one to trust Saul after he had turned to Jesus – encouraging everyone to trust Saul; and here he is – a man 'full of the Holy Spirit' representing the Apostles in Antioch and bringing in Saul – one of the key people in the New Testament and history of the Church.

We need more Barnabas's in the Church! We need to pray for and aspire to this nickname.

I believe that God wants to put encouragement back into people who can't see what He is doing

And I believe He is inviting Barnabas's to step forward. **PRAY**