

SAUL BROKEN IN FOR MINISTRY

Acts 9:19-31

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Once two old men from the Australian outback visited Sydney. They were bedazzled with the things they saw. At their hotel they saw an elevator for the first time. They were looking at the doors of the elevator wondering what it was. They saw an old lady get in and the doors close. Moments later the door opened again, and a beautiful young woman stepped out. Harry, stunned, said 'Fred, quick, call the family. I have to get my wife into that thing!' Talking of quick conversions, wouldn't it be something if becoming a Christian would be as quick as putting someone in a 'spiritual elevator'? Zip them up to heaven and back and it's all done. The unbeliever is now a mature Christian! It's not like that is it? It can take years of prayer for someone to come to believe. Then more years to grow up to become more like Jesus. I want you to think about Saul. Last week we saw how Jesus took a hold of that murderous persecutor of Christians to be the apostle to the Gentiles. How long, do you think it was, from the time Saul was converted till he started his work properly amongst the Gentiles? Something between 11-13 years later! Before Saul was useful for his Lord, he had a lot of lessons to learn.

Jesus said to his disciples (Matthew 11:28,29) *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."* Christian development begins when we 'come' to Jesus. Jesus doesn't say we need to clean up our act first. It's 'Come' and "I will give you rest". 'I will give forgiveness and hope'. Millions have come to Jesus and experienced his grace. It's what we yearn for those loved ones we are praying for. But then Jesus says something more: *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me"*. You become a Christian by coming to Jesus. But then you need to grow and become more like Jesus. To take on Jesus' yoke means to submit to him as Lord. When you do that, you begin to understand the Christian life. It is something that Saul had to learn as well. The highly intelligent, overzealous Saul had a lot to learn about taking on the yoke of Jesus.

After being healed of his blindness (Acts 9:19-21) *"...Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God..."* Here we see Saul's initial response to his conversion. Saul had received his sight and was baptised. And then he was into it. Saul was converted but his temperament was still the same. Full of unstoppable zeal, he 'immediately' started preaching. The

focus of his preaching was on Jesus being “the Son of God”. Being struck down by Jesus on the Damascus road made a huge impact on Saul. It made it abundantly clear Jesus was Lord of the universe. In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote one day everyone will experience what he did. (Philippians 2:10-11) *“...every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, ...”* That is the fundamental teaching of Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, died in Jerusalem aged 33, and rose again, is the Son of God, Lord and creator. Accepting this truth, is fundamental in being a Christian. You are truly a disciple of Jesus when you accept his authority over your life. It is not just ‘Jesus is my saviour, so my sins are forgiven. I go to church occasionally. So, now I can get on with my life’. Being Christian means that Jesus is the Lord, the Master. That is what Paul had experienced.

Saul also saw and preached something else about Jesus (Acts 9:22). *“Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.”* Saul was showing the Jews how Jesus was their Messiah, the fulfilment of the whole Old Testament. Paul’s ability to do that came after another experience, which Luke does not directly tell us about. He hints at it when he writes (Acts 9:23) *“After many days had gone by...”* Paul himself fills in the gap by telling us what happened in Galatians (1:15-17) *“... I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days”*. So, there was the initial flush of excitement telling everyone about Jesus. Which is typical of those first converted. That’s why it’s best to have newly converted people to evangelise. Saul found he needed time to sort out his understanding of the Old Testament. To acknowledge Jesus as Lord was a huge shift in his understanding of the Scriptures. So, he headed into the desert of Arabia for three years. Paul’s confrontation with Jesus made him realize that Jesus as Messiah was on every page of the Old Testament. The prophets, the psalms, in Moses and the Law, the Old Testament are all about Jesus. All the sacrifices and offerings were symbols of Jesus and what he would do on the cross.

As Paul spent those three years in deep study, he would have thought about his calling to share the gospel. You can see him imagining himself getting back into all the synagogues. He would be telling them ‘I now know that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the one for whom we have been waiting for.’ He would have thought to himself ‘Who is better equipped for this than me? I have the background, raised a Pharisee. I know the Old Testament from beginning to end. I have considerable standing amongst the leaders of the Jews. I was so passionate for the Jewish faith I persecuted the Christians. Who is better equipped to reach the nation of Israel?’ Paul tells us in Romans there was a deep yearning in his heart to reach his own people. (Romans 9:1-5) *“...I am not lying*

my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel." Paul was so passionate about his own people that he would rather go to hell himself if that would help save them.

That is the passion that drives evangelism. You love that family member, that friend, those neighbours, your community very deeply. The thought of any of them not experiencing God's grace breaks your heart. You long for their conversion so passionately that you cry out to God. Paul's passion shows us something of God's own passion for the lost. Rather than see all the world go to hell, God took on his own curse. He did it through the giving of his own son to die in our place. That is the intensity with which God loves us. It is a lack of that passion that can see us Christians lose the drive to witness for Jesus. It can seem like we literally don't give a damn. There is so little relating with people these days. Our suburbs are no longer communities. We don't know the people in our streets. We hardly know the people we work with. They are all just faces and figures. If they pass on, it doesn't affect us that deeply. But if we deeply love our family, our people, then it would break our hearts to think of them going to hell. Then we would set up prayer meetings. We would passionately pound heaven's door. Then we wouldn't worry about we are perceived but would speak openly of Jesus. Then we would understand what drove Saul to be the greatest of the apostles.

Paul had his three years in the desert. Like the disciples had their three years with Jesus to learn their mission. Paul is passionate about saving his own people. He is convinced he is the one to do it. So, he strongly argues with the Jews in the synagogues in Damascus. But note the result. (Acts 9:23-25) *"After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews 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."* Paul is unbeatable in debate., But instead of winning the day for Jesus, he finds himself humiliated and rejected. His own friends need to take him to safety. Paul walks away into the darkness, an evangelistic failure. Many years later Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:32-33). *"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness... In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands"*. He says, in effect, he learned a great lesson in being let down that wall. There he began to learn the truth which he wrote in Philippians 3:4-8 *"... I myself have reasons for such confidence. ...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as*

for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." As Paul was humbly escaping Damascus with his life, he realised God's focus was not on Paul's ancestry, or his knowledge of the Law. God simply needed Saul to obey him. That was to go, not to the Jews, but the Gentiles. Paul had to learn to take on Jesus' yoke. Jesus said (Matthew 11:29) *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart..."* In other words, ambition and pride must die. We must have passion for reaching others. But that passion needs to be tempered with humility. Passion, untempered can turn into 'what I can do. The background and skills that I have for doing evangelism'. Then we are subtly pushing Jesus aside as we assume to be the heroes. The zealot Saul had much to learn. Through this experience his pride began to die.

Yet it died hard, and we find him still struggling. (Acts 9:26-29) *"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 Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him."* It's the same old story isn't it? Saul comes to Jerusalem still so driven. Even the disciples want nothing to do with him at first. But God places a mentor in the path of Paul. Remember Barnabas "the son of encouragement"? It reminds us everyone needs a mentor. Someone who walks life with us and wisely channels the passion. Like Saul, converts can be passionate but immature. It requires someone who is wise and encouraging to guide them. Barnabas introduces Paul to the disciples and vouches for him.

From Galatians we learn that Paul's stay in Jerusalem was only fifteen days. But in that time Paul was so strong in his debate with the Grecian Jews that it was Damascus all over again. They tried to kill him. In Acts 22 (18-30) we see that Jesus gave Paul a vision telling him to get out of Jerusalem. *"When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.' "* *'Lord,' I replied, 'these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'* *"Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles."* Paul, in a sense argued with Jesus. He was one of the Jews, he had been present with Stephen's stoning. He was ideal to preach to the Jews. But Jesus in the vision had said curtly "Go, I

will send you far away to the Gentiles." 'I don't need your expertise with the Jews. You are going to the Gentiles. What I need is you, humbly doing my will. Learn from me'.

The disciples, knowing that the Jews wanted to kill Saul brought him to Caesarea, a port town, and shipped him off to Tarsus. Why Tarsus? It was his hometown. They needed Paul out of the way for a while. (Acts 9:31) *"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 fear of the Lord"*. It is no coincidence that Paul is shipped away and now all is at peace. Saul the stirrer and persecutor is gone. Paul the overly zealous Christian, stirring up trouble is gone. Paul was at his hometown about eight years, before he began his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul was a young Christian, doing things with that same zealous character that had driven the persecution. He wanted to do things for Jesus but caused major problems. He needed to learn humility and take on Jesus yoke.

All of us need a great passion for the lost to drive our outreach. We also need to grow up and mature in the faith, so we reach out with humility and wisdom. God doesn't need our heroics or showing off with all our talents. He needs those who have learnt from Jesus. Those who have taken on his yoke and learned how to be submissive. Those who trust the Spirit to do great things, as we humbly obey Jesus.