

[Reading: Acts 9:1-6,19-31]

Today we are starting a new series from Acts “Paul on a Mission” and the first one is “Paul faces trouble”. And we need some background about Saul and to me that is always important. So there'll be many here who know the book of Acts and the story of Saul (Paul) well, and there will be others perhaps who don't know it so well.

Firstly, **Who was Paul?** Now we first hear of him referred to as Saul in chapter 7 of Acts: the story of Stephen and his martyrdom – the first Christian martyr. He had been hauled before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) because of his Christian witness and his bold words, and he was taken out to be stoned, and we read in that chapter 7: “Meanwhile the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

And then we read at the beginning of chapter 8: “And Saul approved of their killing him” (that was Stephen). And then: “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

And then we jump to chapter 9 and read: “Meanwhile Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples.”

So this is a young man, a real zealot, fanatical and uncompromising in his religious ideals. And when he wrote later in his life to the church in Galatia he said: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people.”

And then to the church at Philippi when he was talking about his Jewish upbringing, he said: “If others think they have reason to put confidence in the flesh I have more: circumcised on the 8th day; of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law a Pharisee; as for zeal persecuting the Church.”

So although a young man, Saul's religious upbringing and education had been beyond the normal – he was well trained in Rabbinical schools and we know from history that he studied under the great Rabbis of the day. And as we read, he was already known and respected in the synagogues in Jerusalem, and as we've read, a fanatical opponent of Christianity.

One writer said: “No one is beyond the power of God's grace and the most fanatical and violent opponents of the Gospel can become brothers and sisters of those who follow Jesus.”

So this is who Saul was, and I am using the name Saul because that's the name he is known by until chapter 13 when the church in Antioch sent him and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey and we read that on that journey “...from then on he was known as Paul...”

Now one famous speaker and preacher called Acts “The Adventures of the Early Church”. And these adventures that we read in Acts are not wholly about Paul but mainly. And already in our reading we've seen that the Church had grown from eleven people in the upper room to “The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria”, and that's amazing church growth in a short time. And this same writer said that studying the book of Acts he was impressed by its relevance to our 21st century world.

Is it relevant? Well, God says in Hebrews that his word is “Alive and Active...”, and so it must be, And when we read Acts (and you will be looking at several passages) at times it is difficult to see anything that's relevant for us and our situation today. But it *is* relevant for people in all ages and in all situations and in all cultures, because it gives us Godly examples and it gives us the assurance that however things look God *is* at work behind the scenes now, as he was with his people in the past. And it's so hard to see that at times, isn't it: we see things today that make it look as though the world is going out of control – there are man-made disasters, there are natural disasters, there's the Covid pandemic and so on. But God *is* in control of the world he's made.

And if we look at the culture that people lived in when Acts was written in the 1st century, the Roman Empire was in control; it was a military rule, a strict rule. For example in chapter 22 of Acts: Paul had been arrested, in prison and he was about to be flogged, and he said to the soldiers “Is it lawful for you to flog a Roman Citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?” And that caused great consternation amongst the Roman soldiers because it wasn't. And we read “The commander went to Paul and asked 'Tell me, are you a Roman Citizen?' 'Yes I am' Paul answered. And then the commander said 'I had to pay a lot of money for my Roman Citizenship.' 'But I was born a Citizen' Paul replied.” And It was a great privilege for a Jew to be born a Roman Citizen, and Paul had that privilege.

And we know from history that Roman Emperors and Senators could give some of our own leaders lessons in corruption. And there was sexual deviances, there was character assassinations, there were lots of assassinations, there were scandals of every kind, and these were endemic. And there were competing world views: multiple religions, different ideologies, there were Greek gods and Roman gods, and tribal superstitions all seen in Acts. Could that be familiar when we think of our multi-everything in our society here today?

And these followers of Jesus, including Saul, changed their world, and our world certainly needs changing, doesn't it? And much in the book of Acts points the way to that. We need a transforming Gospel today, and we can see patterns in Acts that show us how that can be achieved.

My second point is **Why did God choose Saul?** Now, many of you will know the story of Moses in the Old Testament. His life was changed as a baby when Pharaoh ordered that all the Israelite babies were killed. And he was saved and he was brought up in his own home by his own mother until he was old enough to be taken to Pharaoh's palace to be brought up by Pharaoh's daughter – his adoptive mother. And there he had a good education which stood him in good stead later. And God used him and that background.

And in the same way here in Saul God chose a man who hated Christians and he persecuted them, but as we've seen he was highly educated and he was well read in the books of the Old testament as well as many Jewish writings. And all this preparation stood him in good stead when he debated with Jewish leaders, when he debated with the Greeks in Athens, with the philosophers, when he preached to and when he taught believers, and when he later had to defend himself against high ranking governors.

And God used Paul's education, his speech, his Roman Citizenship and the fact that he was a Jewish teacher – a Pharisee even. And we often talk about Saul's conversion as being a complete turn around, and in a way it was. But as one writer said: “Saul had not been called so much as to leave Judaism behind as to accept Jesus as the fulfilment of all he believed.” And we know that this is what happened. In our passage we read “Saul spent several days with the disciples in

Damascus, and at once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus *is* the Son of God.”

And so he continued his previous role debating in synagogues but with a completely new thrust to his message. And we read that whereas before he had denied the fact that Jesus was the Son of God, now he preaches two things that really gets the Jews' backs up! He preached that Jesus *is* the Son of God, and he preached that Jesus *is* the Messiah. And the result of this? In verse 23 in our reading: “After many days had gone by there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him.”

And it's ironic that Saul was going to the synagogue in Damascus to put into prison, and maybe kill, Christians, and now he's being threatened by the very Jews who probably would have worked with him. And the church (as we read) then got him away down the wall and in a basket.

Are there men today like Saul who are educated, who are extreme in their religion, are anti-Christian, yet God stops them in their tracks and turns them round like Saul? And yes, there certainly are; and we can think of perhaps imams in Muslim countries: religious, educated, influential, and God puts his hands on them and he brings them to himself, and he uses them.

Now obviously God doesn't only use well educated people like Saul to do his work, and there are lots of examples in the Bible of those who weren't. And Saul in fact said when writing to the church in Corinth: “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called, not many were wise according to human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth, but God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before him.” And of course, we know that many in our generations have been mightily used by God from every strata of life.

And then my third point: **What was the trouble that Saul faced?** I think there are two things: firstly not being accepted by the Christians in Damascus and then in Jerusalem, there was suspicion by the church.

And Saul's conversion presented a severe test for the young church in both these places. This wasn't someone amongst the many who had come to Jesus – heard the Gospel and come to Jesus; this is someone who was well known: this was a Zealot – someone who hated the Believers and caused havoc among Believers wherever he went.

And in the verses before our reading we hear of God speaking to a man called Ananias, a disciple in Damascus. And God appeared to him and he told him to go and lay his hands on Saul to restore his sight. And Ananias' response was “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he had done to your people in Jerusalem. And he's come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” **Can** this man have changed?

But Ananias did as God commanded him. And we read that Saul spent several days in Damascus and although we are not told, I am sure that Ananias was alongside him at that time, and we read “All those who heard him were astonished and asked 'Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on God's name?'”

So immediately Saul was preaching in the synagogue and he could do this because of his education, because the preparation that God had given him. And this led on to the second trouble that Saul faced: in verse 23 we read “After many days there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him...” Not only suspicion in the church, but persecution.

And we read of “his followers” - this must refer to Saul; so although he'd not been in Damascus very long, already he'd been accepted by the church there. And now he goes to Jerusalem where

he faces the same problems: the Christians are suspicious of him. And we read "But Barnabas..." Barnabas took him and brought him to the Apostles and 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.

We first hear of this man Barnabas in chapter 4 of Acts where as a result of Peter's ministry the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and we're told that they begin to share their possessions. And we read that "Barnabas, meaning the Son of Encouragement, sold a field that he'd owned and he brought the money and he put it at the disciples' feet."

And here with Saul he certainly was a Son of Encouragement: because of his words Saul was accepted in the church, and we read that Saul stayed there with them moving about freely and preaching in the name of the Lord. John Stott, that famous evangelical, says "We need to thank God for Ananias who introduced Paul to the fellowship in Damascus, and for Barnabas who did the same thing later for him in Jerusalem. But for them and the welcome they secured for him, the whole course of Church history may well have been different."

And we think that Saul was in Jerusalem for a year before persecution reappears, and we read that he talked and debated with the Jews but they decided to kill him. And so again the Church intervenes and sends him to Tarsus, his home town. So these two troubles that Saul faced from the beginning of his Christian life: suspicion and persecution, as we've heard this morning are faced by Christians in many countries today. And the Barnabas prayer diary last month tells us: "Many Ugandan Christians refuse to have anything to do with Christians from a Muslim background, presumably because they are fearful of Islamic threats. And often these converts had been rejected by their Muslim families and they have no one else. Some have been permanently injured by violent attacks. Pray that more Ugandan Christians will be willing to risk their own safety to help their persecuted brothers and sisters." And that's only one example.

And those from other religious backgrounds often face the same troubles as Saul: they often come to Christ, through dreams and visions (like Saul), but the church is afraid to accept them. And they're suspicious that they've been "planted" to gain information - that does happen.

And some of you will know that I spent a number of years living and working in Morocco, a Muslim country. Although that was a while ago I've been back many times since then, and I know some older Christians very well. And it is difficult when perhaps believers move from one place to another and they want to join the group of Christians, or there are those who come to Jesus, and it's very difficult for that group to accept them because they think that they may have been planted there - it happens so often.

And of course that other trouble that Saul faced - the persecution - is faced daily by God's people throughout the world. Let me give you a couple of examples.

In May this year we read of Leah Sharibou held captive by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria for four years, since she was 14 years old. Many others were released but she refused to convert to Islam. It's believed she has had a baby after being raped by militants.

And then in March this year terrorists attacked a church service in Western Ethiopia. Armed men surrounded the church building, gathered the worshippers together and removed all their mobile phones so they couldn't ask for help. They killed the two ministers on the spot, and then they took the twenty two remaining members of the congregation to a nearby forest and killed them.

These things are happening today to God's people throughout the world and we need to pray for

them.

And so in conclusion. Saul has been returned to his home town of Tarsus – we don't know how long for but it's interesting that in the last verse of our reading we read: “Then the Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit it increased in numbers.” And that's encouraging words to finish our reading with, isn't it?

We hear briefly about Saul at the end of chapter 11 while he's still in Tarsus, and then from chapter 13 the book of Acts is mostly about his exploits and you will be hearing more about those over the next few weeks.

And the book of Acts as I have said before **is** relevant to us today. We are Christians in churches today and as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth where there were many disagreements – there are possibilities of disagreements within churches today. And I am sure that some of us will have been in, or heard of, churches where there have been difficulties; and I have a friend whose church is going through these problems at this very time. Sometimes believers leave their churches because of problems, sometimes churches are split. But as in Paul's day in Acts we see people in situations that we might find ourselves in – it's a very realistic book.

So we have talked about **who Saul was** before and after his conversion, the preparation he had for the work that God had planned for him since the beginning of time. God said to Ananias “...he is my chosen instrument.”

And then **why did God choose Saul?** God had prepared him so that he was equipped and he was able to do the work that God had planned for him, which was certainly challenging.

And finally **the troubles Saul faced** – suspicion from the believers and persecution from Jews that previously he had worked with.

The Bible **is** so up-to-date; God chooses people to do his work from many cultural backgrounds, like the church in the New Testament. And today as we've heard some face suspicion and persecution just like Saul.

I hope that you will be blessed as you continue to hear about this remarkable servant of God: Saul.

Amen