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Acts 9:1-31 midweekchurch

File: Acts 9 (mid)

As we live life, we run into different types of people. Different types of people from all walks of life. From important people, to people who others would consider insignificant. One year I was on a Church Mission at Hat Head, which is a sleepy little town on the NSW Coast near Kempsey. Now each year, on this mission you had to go dressed up as a character. This particular year the theme was Australiana, and I went as a bushranger. So there I was in the middle of summer, with a bushies hat, handkerchief over my face, riding trousers and boots, and a toy gun and ammunition.

Well one night I was taking some young kids home to their caravans after the evening programme. It was the end of a fun day, and I must admit I was being fairly animated, well at least for me! We passed an older couple going the other way, and I said Hi before walking on. But out of the corner of my eye I saw the bloke turn to his wife and heard him say, "*The people you meet, when you don't have a shotgun.*"

The people you meet. Well this evening I want us to meet Saul, well before he became the great Apostle Paul. And I want us to see how Saul met a number of people and situations, and how they changed him from being a persecutor to someone who was persecuted. It is probably the most famous conversion in the history of Christianity. And it is so critical to the story that Luke, the writer of Acts, records what happens 3 times, all in the one book! It is that important. So let us look at Saul and firstly see how he meets the Sanhedrin.

1. Saul meets the Sanhedrin. So who is this Saul? Saul tells us himself in his letter to the Philippians 1 that he was born a Jew, circumcised on the eighth day, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. He followed the law so studiously that he became a Pharisee and studied under the most famous Pharisee of his time, Gamaliel. And now he was so concerned with the purity of the Jewish religion and the honour of God's name, that he decided to cleanse the Jewish faith by ridding the land of this new Christian sect.

So we can see he is a very religious man - he would have to be, to make the 250km journey from Jerusalem to Damascus on horseback in order to extradite these Christian heretics. But if you had to choose 2 words to describe Saul before he became a Christian then the words *sincerity* and *commitment* would be the two that spring to my mind.

Here was a man who was sincere in his beliefs & he sincerely believed that in persecuting Christians he was doing it for God. Here was a man of commitment, who would go to any lengths to serve his religion. Yet just because he's committed or sincere doesn't make him right, does it? Just because you're sincere, just because you're committed doesn't make what you do acceptable. Because you can be sincere, committed and wrong!

Yet that is exactly the opposite of what most people believe today. Most Australians believe if you are sincere in what you believe then that's good enough. Just don't ask me to believe in it as well! But I think Adolf Hitler was sincere in what he believed, and he too persecuted the Jews, but what he did can never be called acceptable.

So when you look at Saul you see a zealous young man who thought he was doing what God wanted him to do, yet God would meet him, face to face and tell him that he wasn't honouring him but persecuting him. It makes you wonder doesn't it? Are all our friends, neighbours, associates who are sincerely trying to live a good, honest, upright lives really serving God, or are they serving their own view of God? What is God going to say to them when they meet face to face? Well done good and faithful servant or away from me, for I never knew you! For when we first meet Saul we see that you need more than just sincerity and commitment.

2. Saul meets Jesus Yet a funny thing happened on the way to Damascus. Saul met Jesus. He was riding along on his high horse, when suddenly he was knocked off it by a blinding light, even though it was midday. He saw a figure, and he heard a voice say "*Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?*"

I think Saul was genuinely stumped when he heard this. He had no idea who could have been saying this. He wasn't persecuting anyone - he was simply going about the Lord's work. But the voice speaks again: "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!*"

So, Jesus was alive! So Jesus did rise from the dead! So there was such a close connection between Jesus and his disciples that when you persecute Christians, you are actually persecuting Jesus. When you hurt a Christian, you are actually hurting God!

Isn't that a fascinating thought? That God is so much within the Christian, that he feels their pain, their hurt, their persecution. But didn't Jesus say something similar to his disciples just before he died. He was talking about when he would come again and how he would divide the sheep from the goats, and he said to those around him that some had fed him when he was hungry, had given him a drink when he was thirsty, had clothed him when he was naked, had visited him when he was in prison. For whenever you do this to the least of one of these brothers of mine, you did it to him.

You see often we complain to God, and say "why are you doing this to me?" When we never ask the question "*God why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you hurting us?*" For God goes through both the good and bad with us, every day of our lives. He knows our situation, he knows our joys and pains, he weeps when you weeps, for whatever you go through, if you are a Christian, Jesus goes through it with you.

Jesus meets Saul on the Damascus road and tells him that his sincerity and commitment wasn't honouring God, it was actually persecuting God. And in what would have been a sickening moment for Saul, the penny drops. Saul was out to arrest others when God arrested him.

Now his conversion experience was unique, because not everyone today hears God's voice or sees flashing lights. Yet like Saul we too must have a personal encounter with Jesus, we too must surrender to him in repentance and faith, we too must receive our summons to service just like Saul did on that Damascus Road.

But one of things we find out about Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road is that if he can be saved, anyone can be saved. If someone who had organised the imprisonment and death of God's disciples, if someone who was breathing our murderous threats, if someone who had such great hostility toward the Church can be saved, then anyone can.

No one is too bad for God. No one is without a chance. Even the thief on the Cross, a man who deserved the death sentence was given his pardon by God. Not because he was good enough, but because of God's grace. As Saul was later to say in that great second chapter of Ephesians, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast."*

So if the chief of sinners could be saved, then anyone could be saved. Anyone in Australia, in your suburb, even anyone in your family. God can turn anyone around. I know Christians who have been drug addicts, tough bikies, prostitutes, hard nosed businessmen, as well as teachers, doctors, mothers and grandfathers. Let us remember that before we begin to right others off.

3. Saul met Ananias Yet not only had Saul met the Sanhedrin, and Jesus, but he was also to meet a Christian named Ananias. For while Saul is led into town, God appears before a devout member of the Damascus church. And he asks him to do the most extraordinary thing. He asks him to go to the man who had come to Damascus to have the Church destroyed, go to him and place his hands on him so that he could see again.

Now that's a big ask isn't? In fact it would be suicidal! And Ananias is very quick to point this out to God. Now do you see a bit of you in Ananias? We quite often tell God stuff that we think he should know. We quite often say to God, I don't think you have all the facts! Yet although he might have complained, Ananias was a man of faith, and he did what he was told.

And in doing so he was used by God in a great way. Don't forget Ananias is just an obscure saint, he is no one great, we will never see his name written anywhere else. Yet God gave him the privilege of discipling the great apostle Paul. This action, that on the outside looked like a little action, was to have great ramifications for the Church. So don't forget, that although we may be scared at times to do what God says, if we trust him, he will look after us. Don't forget that sometimes God does his work through blinding lights & voices from heaven yet more often he uses the prayers & touch of everyday Christians.

What has happened with Ananias has happened thousands of time throughout the history of the world. Just to give you one such example. On April 21, 1855 Edward Kimball was teaching his Sunday School class. When something he said, was used by God's Spirit to bring a young boy to faith. That boy was Dwight L. Moody, who was to become one of the leading evangelists the world has seen. For Kimball he was just teaching a Sunday School class, but in heaven there was rejoicing and for the Church one of its great leaders had now been brought into the fold.

What about our children in our kidschurch, the kids in our Kid's Club, the youth in our py, the toddlers in our playgroup, the people in our Bible study group, those sitting next to you tonight? Is there another Apostle Paul there? Another Dwight L Moody? Who knows? Well God does. And he may want you to have a role in their life. To befriend them, to pray for them, to teach them about the Christian life.

God may be calling you to be involved in their lives. God may be encouraging you to make yourself available to help others. Will you do it? Are you prepared to do something that scares you? Are you prepared to do something that will have a spiritual impact on another's life?

Ananias was. And so timidly he goes down to Straight St. And he places his hands on the blind man. He prays for him. And he calls him "Brother Saul!" What great words! Now they were probably the first words Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion, and they were words of welcome, words of acceptance, words of fellowship.

Here was a man who was here to destroy the Church, being accepted as a brother, a brother in the Church community. So would this Church treat someone like that? Would we be able to forgive so quickly? Or would we be suspicious, asking ourselves what if it's only a sham? I'd hope not. Because if someone has been accepted by God, then he must find acceptance in the Church. Which is thankfully what happened among the believers in Damascus. Saul is accepted and made one of their number. And that is a great example for us to follow here at midweekchurch.

For whoever God brings along, no matter what they look like, or what their background is, they need to be accepted by us. And the best way to do that is to get to know them. To talk to them, to share with them. Don't allow them to walk in and out while we catch up with people that we see every week. This place should be a place of acceptance, so that in it people may grow in their relationship with God.

4. Saul meets Opposition Yet we see from the passage that Saul meets one last thing. He meets opposition. In fact from then on Saul courts opposition. The persecutor becomes the persecuted. Firstly we find that he arouses opposition in Damascus and he has to escape in a basket through a hole in the city wall. Then he goes to Jerusalem, and he finds opposition in the Jerusalem Church, for they don't believe that his conversion is real.

And then he finds trouble amongst the Grecian Jews in Jerusalem. And they too want to kill him. So why does Saul meet this trouble? He meets it because he remains faithful to what Jesus said to him on the Damascus Road. That he was to be God's chosen instrument to carry God's name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. Jesus tells him he will be shown how much he must suffer for God's name.

And if you read through 2 Corinthians we find out how much he does suffer to serve his new Master Jesus. He was in danger from rivers, from bandits, from Jews, from Gentiles, in the city, in the country, at sea and from false brothers. He laboured and toiled without sleep, he went without food and drink, he knew what it was like to be cold and naked.

And besides everything else, he faced daily the pressure of his concern for all the Churches he had planted and ministered to. (v.24-8)

That's amazing isn't it? Saul's life is turned around, turned upside down because he gave it totally, undivided, unqualified to Jesus. Saul has met with Jesus and now he gives his life to Jesus. And as he once wrote to the Church at Corinth he urges the Christians there to "*Follow me, as I follow Christ!*" (Repeat)

Now that's a tough example for us to follow isn't it? Paul met with Christ one day when he was not expecting it. We have met with Christ as well. Paul met with a fellow Christian who was kind to him, who accepted him. That's the sort of place we want to build here. And then God sends Paul out to a world that's full of hardships, struggle and even persecution.

That world hasn't changed much up until today. And that's where God sends us as well. Go! Be my representative. Be my presence. Be my son or daughter. I know at times I get weary of being God's representative. I find it hard not just as your minister, but being a husband, a father, a good neighbour who spread God's love in this world. But because of people like Paul, our passage ends by saying the Church was strengthened, was encouraged and it grew in numbers as people lived in the fear of the Lord.

Wouldn't it be great if when God writes the history of midweekchurch, he too says the same thing. That your conversation and your presence here helped strengthen this Church, helped encourage this group of believers and helped us grow in numbers as we live in the fear of the Lord.