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The Unimaginable: Mercy for the Man who Raised Havoc

Reading: Acts 9:1-19

There are probably things in your life that you would not pray about. Or if you did make them a general matter of prayer, there are certain things you would never dream of asking God. "All things are possible" where God is concerned. But some things are unthinkable, unimaginable.

The believers in Jerusalem must surely have spoken to the Lord about their arch enemy. Saul of Tarsus was a man on a mission. He would settle for nothing less than the total obliteration of the church. The campaign he was spearheading was brutal and relentless. No name struck greater fear into the hearts of the Christians in Jerusalem than that of Saul. I can imagine them praying earnestly about their terrible predicament. My guess is that the prayers would have gone something like this: "Lord, look at this man. He is well connected and he is bent on our destruction. It seems he will stop at nothing. Lord, arrest him in his tracks. Thwart his plans." Some may even have been tempted to pray that the Lord would take his life.

I have come across some people whose inveterate opposition to the Lord and his work is such that I have prayed that God would frustrate their plans. But their conversion was unthinkable. I would be very surprised if anyone prayed for Saul's conversion. They could not imagine Saul as a Christian; not in their wildest dreams!

I. RESOLUTE AND ENTRENCHED OPPOSITION

Let's go easy on those early Christians. You had to see this man in action to know how ridiculous it was to expect his conversion.

A. Credentials

Tarsus was one of the intellectual centers of the empire. As a citizen of that city, Saul would have been thoroughly conversant with Greek culture. In addition he was a Roman citizen by birth. That means he belonged to an influential family (Acts 22:25-29). He's had enjoyed the personal tutelage of Israel's top rabbi. We met Gamaliel some time ago. He was the wise and pragmatic rabbi who suggested to the Sanhedrin that if the Christian movement was not of God, it would fizzle. He adopted a laissez faire attitude and cautioned his fellow

members against executing the apostles (Acts 5:33-40). His counsel prevailed largely because he was the most respected teacher in Israel at the time.

According to a passage in the Talmud (the written record of rabbinic discussions on the law), Gamaliel had among his disciples a student who gave him a good deal of trouble. He is said to have manifested “impudence in matters of learning.” The pupil’s name is not given. He is referred to simply as, “that pupil.” It has been suggested by some scholars that the reference is to none other than Saul of Tarsus.¹ What adds credence to this view is the fact that Saul seems to have been (or become) more conservative than his famed teacher. There are indications of this in Paul’s writings (Acts 22: 3; 26:4-5; Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-6).

B. Stephen’s Witness

We first meet Saul as the young man who stood guard over the outer garments of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen to death. He was in total agreement with this act of violence. It seems that this was the incident that catapulted him to the forefront of the reactionary movement. He becomes its organizer-in-chief. No half measures with this man. He began to ravage the church. There was no place to hide in Jerusalem. He and his cohorts would burst into homes and forcibly drag off men and women, throwing them into prison. He hunted them down and did his level best to get them to blaspheme. This persecution sometimes resulted in murder (Acts 22:4; 1 Tim 1:13).

Actually, Luke uses some extremely expressive language to describe what he was doing. He intentionally depicts Saul as a wild and ferocious beast. This is the only time the word translated “destroy” (*elumaineto*; 8:3) is found in the New Testament, but it is used in the Greek translation of Psalm 80:13, where it speaks of wild boars ravaging God’s vineyard. Luke uses yet another word (*porthēsas*) to depict animal-like ferocity of his attack (9:21). When Luke tells us that he was ‘breathing out murderous threats’ against the disciples he is likening Saul’s actions to the panting and snorting of wild beasts. It’s a vivid picture of a demented animal. It’s as if it had been wounded and instinct has taken over.

¹If indeed it is a reference to Saul, the authors of the Talmud must have assumed he had been a disagreeable pupil because he later turned out to be a thorn in their side.

Out of Character?

What possesses an educated and cultured man to appoint himself as chief inquisitor and to behave like a ravenous animal? It may seem strangely out of character, but it's not all that hard to understand.

1. You see, Saul was a far-sighted man. He could take things to their logical conclusion. We see that in his later writings. While others were taking things at face value, he understood the implications. He knew that the Christians were claiming that Jesus was the Messiah. He knew that they were presenting him as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. He knew that they were asserting that he had been raised from the dead. This threatened all that he had ever stood for. His entire worldview was under siege. If these claims were false, this had to be a monstrous and contemptible blasphemy. And, from his point of view, they *had* to be false. But the movement was spreading like wild fire. No stone could be left unturned. It must be eradicated!
2. But ironically, there was another factor. Deep down Saul suspected that there might be truth in the claims that were being made. We cannot be sure whether he had seen and heard Jesus during his earthly ministry. But he could not have been unaware of what had happened to him. He did see and hear Stephen. Stephen's exposition was masterful. He took the facts with which Saul was familiar and interpreted them very differently from the way in which the rabbi's did. Saul saw a man whose face glowed with the glory of God, who forgave those who were stoning him to death, and who died in peaceful triumph while the rocks rained upon his body.

He himself never forgot that incident (Acts 22:19-20). He could try to ignore that picture, but I don't think he could ever get it out of his mind. The more acutely he felt the challenge, the more adamant he became. By eradicating the witnesses, he could silence the challenge to his orthodox beliefs. The very ferocity of Saul's persecution may well have been on account of a growing inner uneasiness. The renowned Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, put it this way: "Fanaticism is only found in individuals who are compensating secret doubts."

We tend to judge books by their covers. But let's not be misled by the intensity of a person's opposition or their seeming indifference to spiritual things. I remember, as a young pastor, being approached by newcomer to our church. He had recently come to know the Lord and was about to get married. He had just completed his engineering degree and a group of his

university friends had set up a bachelor (stag) party. He knew they intended, among other things, to get him drunk. So he decided on a plan of action. Why not invite his minister?

Now, if ever there is a party-pooper. I remember the initial uneasiness. They never did get him drunk--or me for that matter. I actually had some good conversations that night as some of the guys raised spiritual matters and seemed remarkably open. One of them, however, seemed obnoxious. He had just graduated with a Bachelor of Laws degree and seemed very aware of that fact. He was disparaging towards his friend's newfound faith, partly for my benefit. I remember thinking to myself, "Some of these fellows are really open to the gospel. Except for Peter, of course! He is so self-satisfied and opinionated that he seemed destined for life-long opposition to the gospel." Of that entire group, he was the first to come to faith. Within a few months I had the privilege of baptising him and his wife. Later he became a deacon and to this day he and I are friends. We never know, do we? The derisive bravado was probably *because* God was at work in his heart! Do not judge a book by its cover!

II. THE MOMENTOUS EVENT

A. Determination

You have to admire the commitment of the man. Not content to ravage the church in Jerusalem, he arranges for letters of extradition from the High Priest, collects an escort and heads for Damascus in Syria. That's quite a journey over some pretty rugged terrain. Only about 220 kilometres - but it would have taken an entire week! Here is a man on a mission! Damascus was a beautiful oasis surrounded by desert. There must have been a sense of relief as they neared their destination. They would need a little time to settle in and then down to serious business. He would present the letters to the leaders of the synagogues. He could then to arrest men and women who were following "the Way" as it was called and drag them in chains to Jerusalem to stand trial. No effort could be spared. This movement must be stamped out, no matter what it took.

B. The Light

But at noon, as Saul and his companions neared Damascus, suddenly there was a blinding light and a loud rumble. That was from the perspective of the companions. They saw the light and they heard the sound. But in a sense they were spectators. The focal point of that light was Saul himself. It shone in his

eyes with the intensity of the sun. In an instant he fell to the ground. As the light was directed at Saul, so was the voice. What the others heard as a deep rumble, Saul heard as a voice. Someone was speaking to him in Aramaic: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads (26:14).”

Shaken and blinded, Saul could only respond, “Who are you, Lord?” *Kurios* (Lord) is a title of respect and at this stage we cannot read too much into it. Saul was familiar with the Old Testament and may have thought it was an angelic appearance. Imagine the impact of the next statement: “I am *Jesus* whom you are persecuting.” In other words, “You imagined you were attacking men and women because they were spreading lies about a false Messiah. But I *am* alive and I am all they say I am, and you are opposing me.” “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” This proverb was fairly common in both Greek and Latin. It pictures a lively and recalcitrant young bullock, being broken in by a farmer. The farmer pricks it and prods it but the spirited young bull resists and fights in a futile attempt to ward off control. In the process, it causes itself great pain.

The immediate instruction was simple. “Now get up and go into the city. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do. Shaken and speechless, Saul got to his feet. He had instinctively closed his eyes at the brightness of the light. When he opened his eyes he could see nothing. He was as blind as a bat. His companions led him into the city by the hand. He had expected to enter the city in the fullness of his pride and prowess, as a self-confident opponent of Christ. He was taken, by the hand, to the house of a man called Judas who lived in Straight Street. (By the way, the main east-west thoroughfare in the City of Damascus is still called Straight Street).

For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink a thing. I wonder what went through his mind as he prayed and thought. He was in shock. The foundations of his life had been shaken. This was a time of radical re-orientation. Feelings of regret and repentance would have risen up within him. Pictures of innocent Christians, men and women, would have flooded into his mind. When you are driven, you can see people as things. You can be callous and cruel. But they were people, not things, and they had been right, not wrong. “What *have* I done?” he must have asked himself.

The attention shifts momentarily to a man called Ananias. We know nothing about him other than that he was a Jewish Christian disciple and that he, together with other Christians in the city, was holding his breath in apprehension. Saul’s reputation had gone before him, and they had been

tipped off that he was on his way to Damascus with search warrants and extradition orders.

The Lord told him in a vision, “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 hand on him to restore his sight.” Don’t forget that Ananias knew nothing about what had happened on the Damascus Road. This command took him by surprise. Understandably he objected. To go to Saul would be tantamount to signing his own death warrant. Imagine his amazement when the Lord said to him “Go! This man (this *same* 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 must suffer for my name.”

So Ananias did as he was told. He placed his hands on Saul and said, “Saul, my brother . . .” These were the first words Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion. He could not see the expression on Ananias’ face, but he could feel it in his hands and hear it in his voice. Those words must have been music to his ears. The arch-enemy had been welcomed as a brother. The marauding fanatic had been received as a member of the family. “Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – *he* sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” What an incredible turn of events! Immediately, Luke tells us, 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.

III. CONVERSION

A. Unique

It is understandable that the outward circumstances of a conversion like this one grab our attention. It was more dramatic than most. We certainly need to take account of the unusual circumstances. In a sense, this conversion was unique. But then, every conversion contains factors that make it unique.

B. Similar

But that does mean that it was *essentially* different from other conversions. And I am more interested in the similarities between all genuine conversions than in the differences. Whether you see a light and hear a voice is actually of little importance. Let me focus on a few of these “common elements” this morning.

1. Conversion is the culmination of a process.

Don't be misled by the word "suddenly" in verse 3. What happened on the Damascus Road occurred suddenly. But, as we have seen, there was an important build up. Luke wants us to see that. That's why he introduces us to Saul at the stoning of Stephen. And that's why the Lord said to Saul, 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' That statement would have been meaningless had Saul not been in resistance mode. He was not only opposing the church; he was attempting to resist the work of the Holy Spirit in his own life.

It may be that you are in a similar position this morning. You are not on the rampage, looking for Christians to imprison, but you are in the midst of a process which is intended to lead to your conversion. If that is the case, it is particularly important to realize that:

2. Conversion is never forced upon us.

Some may be tempted to say that God overpowered Saul, leaving him little or no option but to capitulate. I'd say a blinding light at noonday and an audible voice are rather strong incentives. But even with such powerful persuasion, Saul was free to resist. God humbled him but he did not crush him. He offset the prejudices of a lifetime but he did not violate his personality. He never does! He does not demean us into robots.

Some people mistakenly believe that at the moment of our conversion, God *removes* our freedom and we have no option but to comply. That is simply not so. As John Stott remarks, "Sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace."² Saul's response was rational and conscientious and free. Divine grace woos us and wins us; it may even jolt us, but it does not trample upon human personality.

3. In conversion we realize that religion as such is not enough.

Religion may, in fact, be part of the problem. It was in Saul's case. So much for the assumption that all one needs is sincerity! Yes, this is the universal credo of our age. Never mind truth. Sincerity is what counts. You couldn't fault Saul for sincerity. He believed that he was serving God, defending the faith and doing the world a favour.

²John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 173.

4. In conversion we have a real encounter with the risen Lord.

“Conversion” can take place in almost any sphere. A radical new insight can lead to a change of attitude and a resultant change of behaviour. And the change can be quite dramatic. One may even have a religious “conversion” that has little or nothing to do with Jesus. We can be converted to a new community, a new ideology, a new cause, and a new set of beliefs. But none of these changes equates to Christian conversion. That always involves an encounter with Jesus. And all the other changes stem from this encounter.

In Saul’s case the encounter involved a blinding light and an audible voice. The Lord revealed himself in a most unusual way. There have been other conversions that are not dissimilar from it. One such occurrence is the story of Sadhu Sundar Singh. He was born in 1889 to a wealthy Sikh family. When he was 14 his mother died. He turned on the Christian missionaries in the area, ridiculed their faith, bought a Bible and burned it page by page in his home. He went off to a room, and planned to commit suicide on a railway line. But he later wrote, “At 4.30 a.m. . . . I saw a great light . . . I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . I heard a voice in Hindustani, ‘How long will you persecute me?’ The thought then came to me, ‘Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be he, himself.’” At that time Sadhu did not even know the story of Saul of Tarsus.

I have it on good authority that many in the world of Islam are having visions in which Jesus appears to them. God knows what is necessary. Most probably none of us here would *need* such a vision. But in conversion we do meet with the living Lord. We come to an end of ourselves, repent of our sin and trust in the risen Savior. We trust living person, not a dead ideology.

5. Conversion involves a call to a life of discipleship.

When God calls us he has something very specific in mind for each one of us. That was immediately clear in the life of Saul. “Get up, and go into Damascus,” said the Lord. “There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do” (22:10). Saul’s commission was a very particular one and a strategic one. But every one of us is given something to do. There never has been and there never will be a Christian who is called to salvation and not called to service. It is the beginning of a new allegiance and a new life. “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun” (2 Cor 5:17 NLT).

Conclusion

As I conclude, I could emphasize the need we all have of a personal encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ. Without ignoring the uniqueness of this event—an event which changed the course of human history—we can identify features that all Christian conversions have in common.

But I wish to end on a different note. You may be experiencing opposition from a relative, a neighbor or a colleague. Such is their lack of receptivity, their ridicule or even their opposition that you feel it is pointless praying for them. Or perhaps you pray for your protection from them. The account of Saul's conversion tells us many things. Some of these relate to the extreme unlikeliness of his conversion. Nothing could have seemed less likely. But look what happened. Do you know anyone like this? Who knows what God has in store for them? In view of Saul of Tarsus, dare we think of anyone as beyond the scope of God's grace?