

ACTS 9:1-31

Intro:

Have you ever said, or heard people say anything like this?

- SHE'S SO BOSSY?
- OH, HE'S SUCH A DOORMAT!
- THEY JUST NEVER STOP TALKING.
- THEY'RE SO OPINIONATED!
- HE TAKES SO LONG TO EXPLAIN THINGS.

Often we come to conclusions about people without knowing all the information, or from a different (perhaps negative) point of view. Sometimes all it takes is for us to observe people from a different perspective, or with a different attitude.

For example, instead of thinking (or saying) “she is so bossy”, perhaps consider that she has good leadership qualities! Or instead of saying “they never stop talking”, maybe take them as being a great communicator. Or, lastly, someone who “takes so long to explain things” would make a good teacher or trainer.

When we look at Saul in this chapter of Acts, chapter 9, I think we can see that Saul has a bit of a change of heart, so to speak. Well, perhaps a BIG change of heart. In the beginning of the chapter we see he has a particular view of the church. But by verse 20 he has a completely different point of view! What is the change? And what caused it? Hopefully we're going to answer these questions today, as we have a deeper look at Acts chapter 9.

***Introducing Saul.**

We first hear of Saul at the end of chapter 7 of Acts, verse 58. He was present when Stephen is stoned to death. In fact, we are told in chapter 8 verse 1 that Saul actually gives his “approval to his death”. Then, in verse 3 of chapter 8, we read that “Saul began to destroy the church”, dragging men and women to prison.

That brings us to chapter 9. In verses 1 and 2 we read that Saul is “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.” And he is acting with the authority of the high priest when he gets to Damascus to take any disciples as prisoners back to Jerusalem.

So, what can we deduce about Saul from these couple of verses? Well, he is definitely looked upon as a leader of the movement to stop the spread of these Jesus followers. He is a passionate, zealous, informed and respected follower of Yahweh, the Jewish God of the old covenant. And, in his mind at least, he is doing THE LORD's work. He really thought he was serving God.

***Converting Saul.**

As we continue into verse 3, we read that as Saul “neared Damascus”, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'”

Now, often when “light” is spoken about, especially in this context, it often refers to the presence of God. You may recall in the book of Exodus, for example, chapter 14 verse 20, where God appeared as a pillar of fire to give light. Also, in chapter 20 verse 18 of Exodus, where God's presence is indicated with lightning. Again, in Psalm 18:28 where God turns darkness into light.

When Saul saw these flashes of light, he was acutely aware of these kinds of references, as he was a scholar of the scriptures. So, when he answers, in verse 5, with the question, “Who are you, LORD?”, Saul clearly knows that he is addressing God. So, I guess he was a little confused, at least for moment, when he receives the reply, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”! I can just imagine the cogs going around in his brain, **God, Jesus, persecuting, light, God, Jesus!** This is the moment, Saul's light bulb moment, when he realises who Jesus really is. He may have had a flash back to Stephen's stoning, when he had said, “I see the son of man at the right hand of God”.

When was your light bulb moment? Did you have one? Was it as dramatic as Saul?

Then, immediately, in verse 6, Jesus gives instructions to Saul, telling him exactly what he must do. Then, in verse 8, we read of Saul's blindness. This truly is a physical sign of what his spiritual state had been up till this point. Another example of this is when Jesus heals the blind man in Mark 8:22-26, but in two stages. The first stage the man can see people but “they look like trees”. Then Jesus heals the blindness completely. This correlates to the disciple's understanding, or lack of, who Jesus is, and what he had come to do.

Back in Acts, in verse 6, Saul seems to follow Jesus' instructions without question.

After Saul's travelling companions led him into Damascus, he fasted for 3 days, verse 9. The relevance of this is that fasting is often used in the bible when contemplating important decisions. Saul was obviously seeking divine instruction. Also, praying, repentance, some serious thinking going on! A complete change of perspective for Saul here.

***Reluctant Ananias Obeys.**

Next, we are introduced to Ananias. Now this Ananias is not to be confused with the Ananias from Acts chapter 4 and 5, who, together with his wife Sapphira, tried to rip God off and were struck down by Him. Nor is this the same Ananias the high priest who interacts with Paul in Acts 22 and 23. No, this Ananias is a disciple of Jesus, we are told in verse 10. And the Lord gives Ananias clear instructions, in verse 11, of who he is to go and see, exactly where he is to go, and precisely what he is to do. We read, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul,” and, “place your hands on him to restore his sight.” The Lord also tells Ananias that Saul has had the same vision-he knows Ananias is coming.

Straight away, though, Ananias is very hesitant to follow Jesus' request. Saul is clearly not someone Ananias would consider himself sitting down to have a coffee with! In verse 13, “I have heard many reports about this man”, “all the harm he has done to your holy people”. And verse 14, “he has come to arrest all who call on your name”! To Ananias, Saul is clearly against the Lord and His people. He is dangerous. You can imagine him saying, or at least thinking, “are you sure you've got the right guy here, Lord?!” “I mean surely there are better options out there?”

But, after Ananias has voiced his concerns, the Lord gives him some reassurance in verse 15. He tells him that Saul will be His servant from now on. That He has chosen Saul to proclaim His name to the Gentiles. Now this, too, may have been quite a radical idea to Ananias-that this message of Jesus is now to be shared with Gentiles. But I think, perhaps, what Jesus says in verse 16 is the clincher for Ananias, to “seal the deal”. Jesus tells Ananias that Saul “must suffer for His name”. In any case, he then, almost immediately goes.

***Ananias and Saul.**

As Ananias greets Saul in verse 17, he calls him, “brother”. This

indicates Saul's conversion. He is now one of God's people, a follower of Jesus. Ananias then recalls the events that Saul experienced on the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him, revealing Himself to him. Then, with the laying on of hands, Saul receives the Holy Spirit, and his sight is restored. He can clearly see, both physically and spiritually. He was also baptized, which is another outward/physical sign of what was happening inwardly, in his heart. Saul was a new man, with a new perspective, a new purpose.

***Re-introducing Saul.**

Within days Saul is preaching a remarkably different message to that which he had been before—that Jesus, the risen Jesus, is the Son of God!

How confusing this must have been for all who heard him speak! Can you imagine? A full 180 degree turn around, a literal “about face”. He had come to Damascus to imprison the followers of Jesus. And now he was speaking in His name. He arrived with the authority of the high priest of the Jewish synagogue, and was now preaching with the authority of Jesus.

The man, Saul, who had left Jerusalem and this new man, Saul, who was preaching that Jesus is the Son of God, was still the same man, in many ways. He still had the same passion, the “fire in the belly”, same personality, same history, same life experiences. But now he had a new message, the gospel, that Jesus is the Messiah. The same message that Peter and John in Acts chapter 3 were preaching. And, also, that Stephen had been speaking, before his stoning.

He now found himself the new target of the Jews, we learn in verse 23. The same group that he was once a revered leader of, now wanted to kill him. Saul now had to hide himself from them. In verse 25 we see that he had to escape from the conspiring Jews, in the darkness of night.

When he arrived back in Jerusalem, he encountered a new problem. The disciples, we read in verse 26, were so weary of Saul. And rightly so, I guess. How could they take Saul on face value that he was now a changed man, that he was now, himself, a disciple of Jesus? Saul needed Barnabas (who we met back in Acts 4:36) to vouch for him, and to be a witness to how he had changed, and how he had preached fearlessly about Jesus.

Even believers who have seen the power of God at work in their own lives can doubt God's ability to change others, especially so dramatically. Saul continued to preach boldly in Jerusalem, experiencing more opposition. He, then, travelled to Caesarea, then to Tarsus.

In verse 31 we then read that the church, God's people, enjoyed a time of peace throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. The church also was strengthened and grew in number. Why does Luke mention these three places? Think back to chapter 1 verse 8. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It was God's plan for the gospel, and His church, to spread throughout the whole world. And thank God it did. Otherwise we all would not be where we are today.

***Application.**

Whenever I read, and study, a passage in the bible, I find it helpful to identify which person in the story I am similar, or different, to.

Are you like Saul? Are you passionate about the way you're living? Though you don't quite have it right? Are you missing the key to the gospel, Jesus?

Or are you like Saul, after he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus? Are you passionate about following Jesus, despite opposition or hardship? Has your perspective changed? Have you gone from rejecting Jesus to accepting Him as Lord?

Or do you identify with Ananias, who reluctantly obeys? But still obeys. Who perhaps doesn't always understand God's plan or what He requires of you, but still live by faith, trusting in that unknown plan He has for you? Do you have an idea of God's purpose for you? And even though you may not like it, or think it's a good plan, you follow it anyway?

What does God want from us? I think He wants us to be reminded that Jesus is Lord, and we need to proclaim that. He wants us to be open to change, for Him to change us. He wants us to seek Him, earnestly, daily, in prayer. To be focused on Him. He wants our eyes and our hearts to be open to what He has planned for us.

God wants us to be as passionate for the gospel, the message that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is Lord, as Saul was. He wants us to know that He can save, and change, anyone, even the most unlikely among us. After all He saved you, and He saved me!