

Acts | *The Incendiary Fellowship*

The Gospel to the Pharisee

Acts 9:1-19

7:17-16

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."⁷ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened.

This summer we're looking at the Book of Acts, which is the history of the early Christian church. The writer, Luke, the "beloved physician" (Col. 4.14), is recording these events for the spiritual benefit of a friend.

And I think it's safe to conclude that part of the benefit Luke hopes to convey to his friend (Theophilus) is to show that the work Jesus Christ continues to do involves the transformation of people - even really hard cases.

And they don't get any harder than this case and that's why Luke gives such prominence to this man and his transformation.

The Wesleyan scholar (Ben Witherington) in his huge book on Acts wrote: "Without question the story of Saul's conversion is one of the most important events, if not the most important event that Luke records in Acts."

Three separate times Luke recounts this event, this miraculous change of one of the worst people on earth - and he happens to be one of the most religious people on earth!

So it must be pretty important to the whole story and what this event tells us about conversion, spiritual transformation/change can be very helpful to people who want to know the God of the Bible. This is the transformation of a religious man, a very, VERY serious, fundamentalist, fanatical man and his conversion. Let's look at:

1) The FUNDAMENTALIST 2) The Hunter Hunted 3) A New Kind of FUNDAMENTALISM

Here in chapter 9 -- Luke begins to focus on a man who would go on not only to be the major human character in the second half of this book but who through his missionary work and writings would go on to be one of the top four or five most influential figures in all of human history.

In chapter 13 of this book, he becomes known as "Paul" (Greek version of his name) and he, the Apostle Paul, becomes the instrument by which Christianity is both defined and spread over the ancient Roman Empire. He becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles or missionary to the non-Jewish nations. A good bit of the New Testament was written by this man.

But when we first meet him – he's NOT a believer in Jesus Christ; he's the most vocal opponent of "The Way" of Jesus. He first appears (CH. 8) standing by and endorsing the execution of Stephen, the Christian martyr - even though Stephen had the appearance of a messenger from God.

And this pre-Christian Saul was the fundamentalist – that is, of course, a provocative word in today's world. It's a word that has become associated with violence and terrorism...and a word used to sort of denounce any/all religion especially the serious kind ("all fundamentalism eventually turns violent!")

I mentioned a few weeks ago that the value (whether negative or positive) of any brand of fundamentalism is only determined by what is that particular belief's fundamental. So if a belief has, as its "fundamental" the idea of non-violence...then how could that become violent?

For instance, think of the Amish. Most people would consider them fundamentalists but no one has ever been concerned about Amish terrorists because their fundamental is peace/non-violence. So, it depends on the fundamental.

In the case of Saul, the fundamental, the core-value in his worldview (as he would later admit) was his own right-ness. The primary, central, foundational core-belief of Saul is that he is right. Not that Saul would have articulated it that way. He couldn't see it at this time -- he would've stated that his core value was Torah, was Scripture, orthodoxy, the commands of God, or even God Himself.

He was absolutely certain that his life was completely dedicated to the God of Abraham and Moses and to the traditions of the Rabbis and the Fathers and the Prophets. And not only was Saul convinced that he was all about God and truth and holiness and obedience, but all his colleagues were equally convinced--"This guy is really serious about God and about religion/spirituality." Years later he would write, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries...being extremely zealous for the ancient teachings." (Gal. 1.14)

But despite what everyone saw -- and despite what Saul even believed about himself--underneath all those layers of spiritual seriousness and religious zeal and knowledge/doctrine was a desperately insecure/fearful heart and utterly bent on defending his own right-ness.

And so freaked out about defending his own competence and correctness and rightness--so paranoid of having any flaws exposed in what he had worked so hard to establish -- that if anyone interfered with his fundamental right-ness, that person would have to go. His fundamental belief was "I am right" and in order to defend that fundamental... he was willing to murder.

Now the hard thing about this is to realize that we are all fundamentalists in this way. We may not murder at least in a physical sense, but when someone points out our "wrongness" (even in small stuff like driving, cooking, or grammar), we can get pretty tender, pretty defensive.

We're all (much more than we know) very protective of our own right-ness. It's this fundamental desire to be right that's the root of boasting, and it's behind our being critical of others ("They're so wrong! 'goes to show how really right I am !!") One reason for hiding (and hyper-privacy) - don't want people to see my flaws, one reason people don't join a church "I'm better than they are -- I sin openly!!"

And Paul was so lost in it -- even if God HimSELF threatened Saul's right-ness, Saul would rather kill God than surrender his own right-ness. And that's exactly what this warped/wicked fundamentalist was doing.

These early Christians were loving God from the heart not bent on defending their own right-ness, not obeying out of raw fear or peer pressure but filled with the Spirit and joy, confident in the gift of God's right-ness that had been freely given to them.

And that "way" of right-ness exposed Paul and he could think of nothing else but how to stamp out this way of freedom and joy, which he could never achieve by his own efforts. But underneath it all, Paul the religious fundamentalist was fundamentally murderously angry at God. And that's why when God appears to Paul in that Blinding Light -- Jesus Christ the God-Man says, "Why are you persecuting ME?"

It's a recognition that Saul would rather kill God than admit the wrongness of his fundamental belief.

Now how does a guy, so twisted and spiritually vicious -- how does he become an ambassador for love (the author of the Love chapter [1 Cor. 13]) and probably the greatest spokesman for the Gospel of Jesus Christ who ever lived? How did it happen?

Well the word is encounter. The HUNTER BECAME THE HUNTED! Saul has an encounter with Life -- the embodiment of Life. Saul's heart is full of darkness and death. Death is spewing and sputtering out of him -- he's breathing out murder/overflowing with hate and death and darkness...a dragon!

God says (as He said at the beginning), "Let there be Light" -- and in that Light Saul sees for the first time -- not death but Life. The Life of God -- the One who was dead and behold He lives. And in the face of Life -- in the glory of Jesus Christ risen from death, Paul's old self -- his murderous self -- His "gotta-be-right-at -any-cost" self ...dies. Saul's old way of seeing DIES. He can no longer see the world with those eyes -- the eyes that once looked at his credentials and his strength, his seriousness qualifications and competence and valued those things above everything else (Philippians 3) -- those horribly clouded eyes. They have to go -- the death eyes.

There's a Man from the New Creation, the Firstborn from the dead -- the Prince of Life, the first resurrected Man stands right in front of Saul.

James Denison wrote, "Death walked upon the Damascus Road. Death breathing out itself - death incarnate. Death threats, death wishes, death edicts, death indictments. And death met life and death died!"

Saul's opposition to God was fanatical -- but God shows that His life -- His mercy -- His powerful grace is stronger than death. He battles the heart of Saul -- He hunts Saul -- He stalks him -- He assails him. He says, "Saul -- you thought you were hunting the Christians. You thought you were attacking Me -- but it is I hunting you. You were hounding my brothers to death -- now I am hounding you to life."

In Acts 26, Paul tells this story in his own words and he includes words spoken by Jesus Christ (which don't appear in this account of chapter 9). Jesus said, "It's hard for you to kick against the goads." In other words, God was goading Saul -- prompting him to come, making it difficult for Saul not to believe.

At some sub-conscious level Saul was bothered and was doubting his doubts. When he saw these Christians living in freedom and joy and love -- saw Stephen die with a heart full of peace, forgiveness -- heard about the life of the age to come bursting into the present and raising Jesus Christ from the dead -- it looked attractive/real and yet somehow Saul suppressed it -- it was hard for him to keep doubting.

But Jesus Christ was on the move -- loving Saul and hunting him to life.

Now one more truth here about this dynamic -- that Jesus Christ is the powerful Huntsman, the Life Giver: Notice that on the one hand Saul is dead and blinded and then at the house of Ananias he is given new sight and new life.

But think of how Saul's beliefs changed -- on the one hand radical/comprehensive reorientation of his entire worldview (fundamental is changed). On the other hand -- can you imagine how many questions Paul had? Jesus Christ appeared in that Light/Glory that signifies Deity -- is He God? What about the Temple -- the sacrifices? Foods? What about the Gentiles? HOW can the resurrection have occurred if it's not the end of the world? My murders?

In verses 9 and 11, Saul is fasting and praying -- What is he praying? -- See everything has changed but questions still remain -- lots of questions, really big questions. Point is -- when this dynamic is at work -- when the Hunter comes after you to bring you to life -- we don't fold our arms and say, "Uh - uh! Not till all the questions are answered to my satisfaction!!!"

That's just not how it works -- I'm not saying its irrational -- Paul obviously had some rational input here ("Lord, who are You?") but he can no longer resist...he's met the Life Giver and he follows, trusting that whatever is necessary will also be provided.

Now why does Luke give the conversion of this religious man such prominence in his book? Well, in part it's to tell Luke's friend, Theophilus (and all the other readers -- like US!) he's saying this risen Jesus -- is still afoot -- still roaming the earth seeking to give life to even the most whacked out, warped and wild people -- religious fanatics and irreligious fanatics. None are a match for Him. And remember, it was almost impossible to find a self-identified non-religious person in Luke's world!

Luke is saying, "If you believe this...if you get caught by the Life-Giver...you'll find yourself cornered... unable to kick against the goads... you'll succumb to the prodding... tired of running, unable to resist!"

“But will I become a fundamentalist?” Well...you’re already a fundamentalist! And probably your fundamental is YOUR OWN RIGHTNESS...you're addicted to being right... you may go by the name of Mormon or Muslim or Presbyterian...or atheist...or into Yoga...or being spiritual...YOUR fundamental MAY BE TRYING TO BE AGREEABLE...nice... moderate or easy-going...but you have to work hard at keeping up your fundamental! Maybe you're tired.

But when you fall into the hands of the Huntsman...your NEW fundamental will be grace. You’ll begin to see yourself as a radically flawed person...deserving judgment...BUT YOU’LL BE FREE TO ADMIT THAT AND NOT IGNORE OR COVER IT...AND you’ll be able to relax...knowing that there is Someone who knows the worst about you ...and loves you anyway...and the more you believe it, the more willing you’ll be to love others (and even suffer for them – as Saul did [v.16]) – you can relax...have fun...realize that it’s NOT really about YOU...it’s about Him: a new way of seeing, a very different kind of fundamentalism with a unique fundamental.

If you want to talk about this...maybe YOU have been kicking against the prodding of the Huntsman and feel like He’s closing in... come talk to me.

The passage ends with the words, “and he took food and was strengthened.” And I think it’s time we do the same.