

Sunday School Notes 2 September 2018: Unbelievable! Acts 9

We have already heard of the man, Saul – the one who held the coats for those throwing stones at Stephen; the one agreeing with the act although he didn't throw a stone; the one who 'ravaged' the church but was used to spread the good news, nonetheless.

We suspect that even as he went on the warpath against Christianity, he was disturbed by what he had seen. Stephen had died without hatred and with a prayer of forgiveness. Probably many of the men and women he was dragging off to prison showed the same attitude. I am convinced that Saul was too intelligent not to puzzle over this. Also he was a student of the very man (Gamaliel) who had warned the council to be careful that it didn't end up fighting God. Saul must have had a lot on his mind.

And then on one special day, all these influences came together. God knew it was time for him to take the final step – and what a big step it was. He had to cross over from hating Jesus to loving him; from actively stopping any mention of Jesus' name to praying to him.

No wonder God created a dramatic occasion for Saul!

Saul had begged the high priests to give him letters empowering him to arrest Christians in Damascus and drag them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. Damascus was about 200 kms away from Jerusalem. Perhaps the long journey gave him time to think? Just as he neared the city, a light from heaven flashed all around him. It was so intense that he couldn't ignore it, and he fell to the ground.

Then Saul heard a voice, calling him by name and asking him why he was so determined to hunt this person down. Confused, Saul asked who was speaking. The shocking answer came: "I am Jesus who you are persecuting." Imagine Saul's reaction! He believed that Jesus was a fraud, a simple imposter from Galilee, a dead man – how could he be speaking to him here nearby Damascus?

The voice went on: "Get up, Saul, and go to the city. You will be told what to do then."

And imagine how weird it must have looked to his companions! They saw the light and heard Paul speaking – but there was no-one there for him to speak to! Then they saw him struggling to get up and probably rushed over to help him. And they realised that he had been blinded! His eyes were wide open, but he could see nothing! Why had the light affected him and not them? Shaking their heads over this, they lead Saul by the hand into the city, probably taking him to the safety of his accommodation in Straight Street where he told them to leave him alone.

For 3 days he stayed there, not eating or drinking – just thinking about everything. By the end of those 3 days, he knew that he had been wrong. He was ready to listen to Jesus!

So God took the next step – an equally unusual act. One of the leaders of the Christians in Damascus was a man called Ananias. He and his group had probably been aware that Saul was coming and had probably Ananias been expecting to be arrested. Imagine how they must have prayed and prayed for courage and perhaps for help. Now God answered their prayers, by telling Ananias to go to the house of Judas where this same man called Saul was staying! Saul was expecting him.

But... but ... praying for courage is one thing; acting stupidly is another. Ananias had to make sure he was really hearing what God was saying. This Saul was the one who was coming to make trouble, after all.

Lovingly God made it clear that Ananias must go because this ultra-Jewish scholar and activist, Saul, had been chosen to be the chief person to reach out to the non-Jews. So Ananias went bravely. He knocked on the door and when he was shown up to Saul's room. And although this was the enemy of the church, Ananias greeted him lovingly as 'Brother Saul' and, reaching out to touch Saul, he told him that Jesus had sent him so that Saul could see again and receive the Holy Spirit. And immediately all the pieces fell together in Saul's mind. Saul got up, ate some food (the first for 3 days) and was baptised as a Jesus' follower!

His life changed forever.

Imagine the shock when the priests who had been expecting him to come and arrest Christians discovered that he didn't intend to act against them because he had become one of them. In fact, he began to speak publically and to prove that Jesus was God's Messiah. What more proof did they need of the power of God through Jesus?!

Saul had been a very obedient Jew, now he learnt to be an obedient Christian – going to places and mixing with people he had never thought of mixing with. He was no longer the up-and-coming young man, and some of the Jews were so angry that they decided to silence him. They watched the city gates to kill him as he left Damascus. They probably also thought that Saul's death would prove that Jesus wasn't powerful. Fortunately Saul got to hear about the plot and left Damascus by basket power – being lowered down the walls from a window in the middle of the night. Not very dignified, not very comfortable but he got away safely.

That was just the beginning of his new life of suffering and service. 2 Cor 11: 24 lists some of these sufferings: 5 floggings (39 lashes each time), 3 beatings with rods, 3 shipwrecks, 24 hours adrift at sea, travelling constantly along the dangerous roads of those days where bandits and wild animals, in danger of capture, feeling cold, hungry, thirsty, rejected by those who used to be friends. Yet, towards the end of his life, he wrote letters from prison where he spoke about joy. He rejoiced that he had been able to serve Jesus.

We are unlikely to suffer like Saul did, but when we get to the end of our lives will we rejoice that we have known Jesus? Are we going to choose the safe, sad way or will we go on this great adventure in Jesus' love?