

You could say I know Saul as well as anyone. Saul and I first met as students, studying the Torah together under Gamaliel. They were exciting times. Young, enthusiastic, each day was an adventure. It was clear to all of us that the master had a soft spot for him; Gamaliel knew talent when he saw it and it was clear to him from the start that Saul had what it takes. Saul was extremely intelligent, many are the times we saw Saul and Gamaliel lock horns in debate. I think we all enjoyed it, two great minds jousting with each other. You could see it in their eyes, they both loved it. We knew way back then that Saul would make a name for himself one day; we'd joke that Saul would be High Priest. Called him 'Your Holiness'. And he'd laugh us off - yes, Saul could laugh at himself. But then his eyes would glaze and he'd turn very serious. He knew big things were expected of him and would surely come his way. To look at Saul, there was nothing impressive about him. Bald headed, bow legged, he was a small man with a rather large nose. But what he missed in looks was compensated in other ways. He pushed himself hard, studied the Scriptures day and night. A few of the others used to get jealous, but not me. I was pleased for him. Anybody who works that hard deserves everything they get. He was an extremist by nature, black and white that was Saul. All or nothing, right or wrong, it was simple as that as far as he was concerned. There were no shades of grey at all.

Saul really made a name for himself in Jerusalem, when the people of the Way were becoming popular. That's what they called themselves ... followers of Jesus is what they really were. That was their way of referring to themselves..People of the Way, Christians....

"Blasphemers!" he called them. "Heretics! We've got to stamp this out once and for all" And that's where he and Gamaliel really differed. Saul might have been his student, but he didn't have same temperate outlook that Gamaliel had. I can still see his face during Gamaliel's speech: Paul was steaming under his m... as he listened to Gamaliel's words: Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."... Later the whole speech was recorded by Luke in Acts 5:38-39 (NIV). Gamaliel convinced the Sanhedrin that day, turned the whole debate, but he didn't persuade Saul. Anger was etched all over his face. "They've got to be stopped!" he hissed and dug his fingers deep into my arm.

It wasn't long after that things exploded. And again it was at the Sanhedrin. I could feel the tension rising during Stephen's speech, people became increasingly agitated. Murmuring was getting louder, echoing around the hall, people were waving their fists and standing up and pointing. Then Stephen looked up, I wondered

what he was doing. “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” They promptly dragged him out of there. “Blasphemy!” they cried. There was an irate procession outside the city, and then they stoned him. That was the day we realized what had transpired. For Saul didn’t lift a finger during the whole episode, he simply stood there nodding his approval while the witnesses stripped off and laid their clothes at his feet. We knew then that he was the grand concert master orchestrating the whole sordid affair. To this day, I don’t know what had transpired, what conversations or back room deals took place. But it was clear to all of us right then and there that Saul had come of age. He was now at the forefront.

In the weeks that followed, Saul began to destroy the movement. Operation Demobilization you could call it. They went house to house, flushing out the people of the Way and hauling them off to prison, even the women. Saul was tireless, resolute, methodical. And he was successful. But he was still not satisfied. I told you didn’t I, black and white, all or nothing. He zealously and meticulously worked at exterminating the heretical sect. Anxious to do more, he was going to stomp out this movement once and for all. I was part of the team that set out for Damascus. He had official letters from the authorities giving him all the power they could give in this program of persecution. So with letters in hand, we journeyed over 200 miles searching for those who had fled from the rising tension in Jerusalem.

We only would had been about an hour out of town when it happened. Don't ask me to describe it, because I can't. Some have said to me it must have been the wind. Believe me, it wasn't. It was a sound unlike anything I've heard before or since... A voice... Completely unintelligible, mysterious, other-worldly. In an instant Saul had fallen to the ground, blinded, **both hands cradled his face... screaming about a blinding light.** A voice called him by name. "Saul" it said. "Saul . . . Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you Lord?" he called out. And it spoke to him, we heard the sound, still unintelligible to us but not so Saul. "I am Jesus", he explained later, "whom you are persecuting."

We were shaking I tell you, speechless. If we hadn't heard for ourselves, we would have sworn he was crazy, many do. I don't know how long he lay there in the dust, it seemed a long time. Eventually we continued the journey, the mute leading the blind. I'd never seen Saul like that before, he was like a small child, totally helpless. He had to be led around by the hand - a total contrast from the Saul we knew - the one who was so resourceful, so active in pursuing believers all the way to Damascus. Now, he was helpless, fragile and dependent. Saul looked weak and frail. Saul, who once knew so much about religion, **about God, about big important ideas** and **big significant people**, became like a little child who must be led by the hand, instructed by the very ones he once thought he was above.

I stayed with him, and with a few others. For three days he fasted, still blinded and shocked. He kept calling himself the worst of all sinners, re-lived it all; weeping, waiting for what we did not know. The enormity of the shock was so great. And then there was a knock on the door which pierced the darkness of our bunker. A solitary figure stood in the doorway looking very uncomfortable. I don't know who was more uneasy. Here we were shaking on the inside, while he was trembling on the outside. He looked like he didn't want to be there. Not that I blame him, he knew Saul had the power and authority to kill him on the spot. He said he was sent, so in he came, placed his hands on Saul and, with all the authority his trembling voice could muster, prayed: "Brother Saul, the Lord - Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" And it happened just as he said, something like scales fell from his eyes. (Don't ask me to explain it any better than that, I can't.) But once this man had prayed, Saul could see again. He got up and immediately went to be baptized. We didn't understand that... When Saul came up out of the water, all shining, the few remaining strands of his hair plastered to his scalp, I couldn't help but think of those who had flocked to hear the Baptist. Tax-collectors. Soldiers. Simple villagers. Saul had joined their ranks. How the mighty had fallen. Fallen into the hands of the living God. Fallen on his feet. Fallen into grace.

I was tempted to laugh at this ungainly sight. Stripped of all dignity, his bowed legs protruding awkwardly through his saturated garments, Saul looked far from impressive. He'd been brought low. But neither did the solemnity of the moment escape me. Saul stood with his head bowed and arms outstretched, considering his own bedraggled figure. And then looking around at us, he threw his head back with tears and laughter as the trickle of running water continued to carry away the stain of his rebellion. After he had regained his strength, he went to the synagogues and began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God. And no one's been able to stop him since. Didn't I tell you? Black and white, all or nothing; everything Saul did from that day onward was an attempt to overwhelm the world with grace.

And me? Well, I realized that I too must go down and do what he was doing. That I must strip myself of all my adornments - of all that I believed was impressive - and wash. I realized that if someone like Paul could be forgiven, then anyone could. That if the chief sinner could be cleansed . . . well, there was hope for me as well! Saul frequently talks about himself in his letters, regarding himself as a walking sermon illustration: Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. 1 Timothy 1:13-15 (NIV) 'Of whom I am the worst' - there is nothing a person can do which is more sinful than try to attack Christ, God's Anointed. If you vehemently oppose God to the point of raising your hand to actually kill Him, you are actually about as sinful as sinful can be.

The reason Saul was converted on the Damascus road was to show what the gospel is all about - that if he can be converted, then anyone can be converted. If the chief sinner can become a Christian, then anyone can. If the worst sinner can come to Christ, then there is no one who is beyond the pale of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Christianity is not for those who are good, it is not based upon our achievements, but upon God's graciousness. Christ didn't die for good moral upright successful achievers. He died for sinners. If somebody like Saul could be forgiven by the death of Christ, then anybody can be forgiven. If a man who purposely set out to persecute Christians in order to obliterate the name of Christ from all human history, if that person can be forgiven, then there is hope for us all. It doesn't matter what we've done or where we've been. It doesn't matter what memories fill me with regret, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is for me and for you.

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Easter

Acts 9: 1-19, 1 Timothy 1:13-15

4/14/2013

On The Road to Damascus

There is nobody who has done such a terrible thing that they are beyond the mercy of God, beyond forgiveness, salvation. God's mercy covers me. It covers you. It covers all who ask for it.. Pretty fantastic, isn't it?

\* \* \*