
Saul meets Jesus

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 4th October

Galatians 1:11-17 Acts 9:1-19



Saul meets Jesus: Damascus road experience:

The gold standard – BUT

No quick fix – No easy ride

Hope for anyone – BUT

Only one saviour

It's all grace

It's a journey

Application:

Walking with Jesus and each other.

Who is beyond the scope of Grace? - BUT

“Who are you Lord?” – Always in discovery mode

Let's pray, open our eyes that we would see, our minds that we would understand, our hearts that we would serve, amen.

Occasionally you hear of people who met Jesus out of the blue, and it profoundly shaped their life. It's often spoken of as being a “Damascus road” experience. From a “Saul” to the “Apostle Paul” is quite the transformation. But, and there is so often a “but”. There will be no “easy ride” for Saul. And his transformation was no “quick fix.”

One of the very helpful things about the Bible is it does not present things in an unrealistic light. It's a real life story, about real life people, working out their faith with all the ups and down that come with that.

Paul is a great example. His life and his writings permission us to be both real, and hopeful.

- Real in the struggles.
- Hopeful in the power of God that surrounds us, and indwells us.

It's unhelpful, discouraging, even guilt inducing, when preachers paint unrealistic pictures of what it means to follow Jesus. It can lead us to a state where we think we are always failing.

No quick fix for Saul. It's not like he meets Jesus, and abracadabra, all is well. We know his transformation took time because Paul tells us. Soon after his dramatic meeting with Jesus he disappears into the outback's of Arabia for 3 years.

In Galatians Paul talks of another 14 year period where we are given no details as to his whereabouts. Or what he was doing.

One might wonder what was happening.

- Had he run out of energy?
- Had his initial burst of enthusiasm worn off?
- Had he been scared off when he found himself on the receiving end of the same sort of treatment he had dished out to the followers of Jesus?

Let's just say the Holy Spirit took all the time he needed to make sure that Saul rightly understood and could rightly unpack the OT scriptures. And that he was rightly prepared for what he was called to do. That is take the gospel to the Gentiles, and help the Jewish children of Abraham see Jesus for who he was, the Messiah.

Given some 17 years of focused preparation, Saul, now known as the Apostle Paul, would be so familiar with the Gospel that he was able to both, refute false teaching, and deal with the various pastoral situations as they appeared in the churches.

There is an interesting detail that Paul gives in 2 Cor that might well cast a light on what was happening in the 14 year period mentioned in Galatians.

Paul was under attack in Corinth from some who were doubting the authenticity of his apostleship. Paul lists his credentials. But he does so in a way as not to draw attention to himself. He says this in ch 12.

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”

Paul, I think, was talking about himself. It took whole bunch of years for Paul to process what he saw and heard.

- There would need to be some serious amount of rethinking and recalibration, given his prior prejudices and self righteousness.
- There would need to be some serious amount of processing given his revelations.

It would take time. Some considerable amount of time before the Apostle Paul, was set free to use his pen. With the result that nearly 50% of the NT is God speaking through him.

To make the pastoral application again.

- If we are sometimes frustrated over what might seem like slow progress in our own spiritual lives.
- If it seems we are a bit slow to grasp and implement Gospel truths and practices, bear in mind the HS took all the time that was needed to turn a Saul into a Paul.

If you think from Saul to Paul is impressive, does not the bible teach us that we are being transformed into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit will take all the time that is needed.

Back to Saul. No quick fixes. No easy ride. Within days of regaining his sight, and his arguing in the Damascus synagogue that Jesus was God's Son, the Jews were planning to kill him. To read his story is somewhat harrowing. He should have been dead a number of times.

There is even some speculation that on one occasion, as recorded in Acts 14, when Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city, the crowd supposing he was dead, there is some speculation that maybe he was dead. The text has an interesting detail that I had never noticed until I was preparing this message. “But when the disciples gathered about him, he “rose up” and entered the city”.

I would presume the disciples were praying as they were gathered around him. And if this was not a resuscitation, it was certainly a remarkable recovery. From “supposing he was dead”. To up and about just like that.

But, did you catch it. He didn't just "get up" he "rose up". Interesting choice of words. I wonder. I will leave that to you to ponder and take encouragement, lest you think any situation is beyond God to resolve.

At the very least we can say Saul was at one time dead spiritually. Top theological student and religious practitioner, notwithstanding, Saul described himself as dead spiritually before meeting Jesus.

It always pays to look at the word very carefully. You never know when God might draw your attention to a certain detail or word. After noticing the word "rose" in the context of then Jews trying to stone Paul to death, as I was reading Acts 9, I noticed the same word.

In answer to the question "who are you Lord?" Jesus identified himself and tells Saul to "rise" and enter the city and await further instructions. Vs 8 Saul then "rose" from the ground.

In my NRSV that I've been using for the good part of 35 years, Jesus tells Saul to "get up". In vs 8, Saul "got up". I've only recently started using the English standard version. It's more of a literal word for word translation backed by many of the evangelical biblical scholars.

There's a subtle difference between "got up" and "rose up". One draws out the inference that God is working. That God is bringing life where there was death. It's subtle, but significant.

Suffice to say, as we look at what happened when Saul met Jesus, let it be an encouragement **that;**

- No matter how hard hearted, or argumentative.
- No matter if atheist, or agnostic.
- No matter how sinful, or cynical.
- No matter if "dead as dodo" spiritually.

No one is beyond the goodness, grace, and love of God.

There is no hiding the fact that before Saul met Jesus he was a brutal and sadistic persecutor of Christian's. If that sounds like I'm exaggerating and going to far for effect, as sometimes preachers are want to do. The specific Greek words used when describing his behaviour point to his brutality and his sadism. No matter. Saul is no match for Jesus. The enemy of souls is no match for Jesus either. Everything he tries backfires.

Earlier in Acts, as he tries to shut Peter and John up using the religious leaders, the church prays for boldness to speak and now there a whole crowd speaking about Jesus.

Stephen is executed. Saul begins a campaign of terror and persecution. That simply scatters the believers who can't help but talk about Jesus.

Saul's persecution of the church simply becomes the means that God uses to ensure a church that had become a little too comfortable would be his witnesses beyond Jerusalem.

Take that principle to heart as a reminder that whatever we see in our world today. Whatever we see in the church today, God is sovereign and whatever the enemy tries will backfire. The supreme and ultimate example of that of course is the cross. The enemy of souls, the devil thought he had won the battle that day. Not a bit of it.

As we zoom forward to what we see happening in Acts, I bet the enemy thought Saul was his man.

- Pious.
- Academic.
- Zealous.
- Fully entrenched in the religious system.

Just the sort of fellow Satan could use. I say this with nothing other than grief and sorrow, and aware of how short I fall. I have heard a few "Saul's" in my time.

- Ones who are influential in the church, but do not understand or preach the gospel.
- Ones who confuse and discourage the sheep.
- Or worse. Stop the sheep becoming a part of Jesus flock.

Thankfully for us, God had other plans for Saul. So significant is his story that we have three accounts of it in Acts. Each giving important details.

Three important lessons to want to draw out briefly.

First, the futility of thinking that anything, or anyone, other than Jesus can save us. Second: The fact that it is only by God's sovereign grace that we can become followers of Christ. Third: getting to know and becoming like Christ, is a journey and we can't rush it.

Firstly, then. There is only one saviour. We can't save ourselves.

Later in his teaching and pastoral ministry, as he compares and contrasts the work of Christ and the work of the flesh Paul says this:

Phil 3:4-8 If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

In a works righteousness system, as compared a grace and faith righteousness system, Saul was a high achiever. BUT! Compared to knowing Jesus, Paul summed all his prior achievements up by saying ... I consider them rubbish. That word that is translated “rubbish” is found only here in the NT. It the word that would be used for excrement or a rotting corpse.

By his own assessment, his pedigree and performance amounted to nothing good, in comparison that is, to knowing Jesus. All my accomplishments and achievements . All my standing, socially, spiritually, academically, in comparison to knowing Jesus, excrement, a rotting corpse. Strong language to make a strong point. Jesus is our only saviour.

Secondly, Grace is the key to spiritual truth and transformation. We can see several things that show how much Saul’s conversion was an act of God’s sovereign grace.

Firstly, Saul’s state of mind as Jesus met him. Our Damascus rd passage begins, Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Saul is described in another passage as ravaging the church. He talked of himself being like a wild animal. Hardly the description of one open to Jesus.

The second bit of evidence that Saul’s conversion was a thing of grace, was the fact that Saul had very little do with what happened. God and gravity were the prime movers. Saul was getting on with his business, and he is knocked to the ground as Jesus appears in a blinding vision.

The best evidence, though, that Saul’s conversion was a sovereign work of God’s grace, are his own words.

- Galatians. “God called me by his grace”.
- Philippians “Christ Jesus took hold of me”.
- Timothy “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly”.

Further, God had been working in Saul’s life for longer than Saul would have realised. In the Acts 25 account, Jesus said to Saul “it is hard for you to kick against that goads”. A goad is a long pointy stick that is used get a bullock heading in the right direction. It’s as if Jesus was saying “Saul, I have been trying to direct you and its time. Stop fighting.”

Saul had tried it his way and God graciously broke through into Saul's life. It was dramatic. But it was not without preparation. I think it was John Stott who made the first, if not both of the following observations.

- The man who has set out to capture and kill Christians, is himself captured by the risen Lord Jesus.
- The man blinded by his zeal and prejudice is literally blinded.

But in that blindness Saul sees for the first time. He realises that Stephen and the other believers were right about Jesus. Then, through another vision, this time given to Saul and Ananias, Saul is prayed for, healed, and baptised by the one who at first was petrified about going anywhere near Saul.

Vs 13-14, "Lord I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your Saints in Jerusalem. And he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name". Vs 15, But the Lord said to him "go for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, and Kings, and the children of Israel."

Ananias was obedient to the Lord. "brother Saul, receive your sight ". And something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. It's a beautiful example of Jesus being reconciliation. A persecutor of Jesus and a follower of Jesus are now brothers. Saul is now somewhat ready for his new life, though his retraining will take some time as we have seen.

That leads to our third point. Following Jesus is really a journey where things take the time they take. I'm sure when we reach glory we will not be concerned how long it took, only that we arrived.

Let's finish by drawing out a couple of brief applications.

The first comes as we take to heart the question that Jesus asks Saul when he said "why do you persecute me? The question points to the fact that Jesus and the believer are one. Surely that link between the believer and Jesus would encourage and challenge us as we relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second application helps us as we relate to people generally. Given Saul's background we could ask the question "is anyone beyond the reach of God's grace"? However, we must respond to that grace if we are really going to get it. Saul's travelling companions, the ones who led him to Damascus by the hand, one would assume, were a part of his posse.

Ponder this, and putting all three accounts together.

- They saw the light, but they were not enlightened.
- They heard the voice, but they could not understand what was being said.
- They fell to the ground, but they got up unchanged.

Not so Saul.

- It was the glory of God and the person of Jesus that blinded him
- It was the grace of God and the prayers of Ananias that open his eyes, and set him on a journey of discovery.

He responded as needed. He learned as needed. And the key might be seen in the first words that Saul ever said to Jesus. “Who are you Lord”.

We who sit here today are the beneficiaries of God’s revelation to Saul as we search, and are shaped by the Scriptures. Our lives as Christians are nothing less than a journey of discovery that helps us unpack, and live in the light of the word “Lord”. No quick fixes. No easy ride. It will take the time it takes, and Jesus is with us every step of the way.

Let’s pray...Lord Jesus we thank you for the grace that opens blind eyes and raises up to life with you, even eternal life, amen.