

“The Way” (14)

We’re continuing our study of the **Book of Acts** this morning and if you remember from last time we saw how Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch and then was taken away in the Spirit. But while all this was going on we need to remember there was a great persecuting taking place in the background, led by a man named Saul as we read in **Acts 8:1-3**. And so today Luke is going to inform us that the persecuting of the Lord’s church hasn’t gone away, in fact the persecution was about to increase.

A couple was having a heated discussion regarding the family finances. Finally the husband exploded. He said, "You know, if it weren't for my money, this television set wouldn't be here. And if it weren't for my money, that easy chair you're sitting in wouldn't be here. And, if it weren't for my money, this house wouldn't be here." The wife looked at him and said, "Are you kidding? If it weren't for your money, I wouldn't be here!"

And I guess the point of the story is, if it wasn’t for the determination of a man name Saul to persecute the Lord’s church, there s a chance that we wouldn’t be here as Christians today. **Acts 9:1-2** “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”

Luke tells us that Saul was so determined to do what he thought was religiously right, not only did he persecute the church in Jerusalem, but even went to foreign cities to carry out his vicious persecution. And make no doubt about it, Saul was very vicious when it came to persecuting the Lord’s church. Now I’m not going to deal with the persecution he promoted today because I would like us to focus on two little words for a moment.

Now we know the Lord’s church has many names in the Bible. The church is called ‘**the church of God**’ in **1 Corinthians 1:2**. The church is also called ‘**the church of Christ**’ in **Romans 16:16**. And here in **Acts 9** were introduced to another name for the Lord’s church. Saul was authorized to seek out a group of people who followed “**the Way**.” Now those who followed ‘**the Way**’ were Christians like you and I who followed Jesus Christ during Luke's day.

You see the Lord has always had a **Way** or a pattern for His children to follow. **Malachi** tells us about priests who had turned from ‘**the way**’ in **Malachi 2:7+8**, “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction-because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty. But **you have turned from the way** and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the Lord Almighty”.

And remember what Jesus said in **John 14** when Thomas asked Jesus, “Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way”? Jesus replied in **John 14:6+7** “**I am the way** and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”.

And all the way through the **Book of Acts** we see people who are followers of ‘**the Way**’. We see it first here in **Acts 9:1+2** “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there **who belonged to the Way**.”

We see in **Acts 18:25** when Apollos “Had been **instructed in the way** of the Lord”. In the next verse in **Acts 18:26** we see that “Priscilla and Aquila invited Apollos to their home and explained to him **the way** of God more adequately”.

Over in **Acts 19** we see Paul debating with the Jews and the Bible says in **Acts 19:9**, “But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly **maligned the Way**”. Also in **Acts 19** we see trouble breaking out in Ephesus and Luke tells us in **Acts 19:23**, “About that time there arose a great disturbance **about the Way**.” And then finally in **Acts 24** when Paul was speaking with Governor Felix, Paul discovers in **Acts 24:22** that “Felix, was well **acquainted with the Way**.”

Now those people are the very people whom Paul would go searching for and when he found either men or women who followed that belief, he was authorized to take them in bonds to Jerusalem. But Luke tells us that Saul's mission of persecution was interrupted by a great light coming down from heaven and shining around him.

Acts 9:3-9 “As he neared Damascus on his journey, 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?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

Can you imagine being there on that road? Your merrily plodding along the road, having a discussion about what you are going to do with these people who follow the Way, just building up your righteous bank account, climbing up the religious ladder with all your good deeds and then suddenly not only does a bright light appear but a voice is heard too. No wonder Luke tells us Saul fell to the ground as the voice asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Now I don't know about you but if I heard a voice I would have two choices. One, I would book myself an appointment with a psychologist or two I would answer the voice. And that's what Saul did, he asked who it was that was speaking and again the voice replied according to Acts 26:14, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Now let's just stop and think about this for a moment, here is man who gave the approval of Stephen's death, here is man who viciously went about killing and imprisoning the followers of Jesus. And now Jesus says to this same man, "Saul when you are doing all these things and persecuting my people, you are actually persecuting Me". He says, "Saul, it's hard for you to kick against the goads." Just like some in Peter's audience in Acts 2 panicked and asked "What must we do?" after they realized what they had done in killing the messiah. Saul trembled and asked what he must do.

You see we are living in a society where people think that God is like Santa Clause, all he does is give gifts. Where people think, "Yes God is good, He sent His Son to die for us, just ask God whatever we want and He will gladly give it because He is a loving caring God." But loved ones, God is not only a giver of good things, He also wants something in return. He wants obedience to His word.

When was the last time you asked God what He wants you to do? When was the last time, you said "God thank you for answering my prayers, thank you for the salvation you have given me but God what do you want from me"? Let me share with you a few things that God may want you to do.

God may want you to pray more often, maybe you only praying once a day and that's at meal times, God wants you to pray more. God may want you to read His word more regularly, maybe you only read or hear God's word on Sunday mornings, God wants you to read His word more than once a week. God may want you to meet with other Christians more regular, you only see or speak with other Christians once a week; maybe God wants you to stay in touch with other Christians as much as possible. God may want you to stop being busy doing other things, you could come to the mid-week Bible studies but your always busy doing something else, maybe God wants you to put time aside for Him first.

I don't know what God wants you to do, but God does and maybe you already know what God wants you to do but you keep putting it off. God doesn't make disciples for the sake of it, He makes disciples to serve and do His will. The Lord said Saul, "This is what I want you to do, I want you to arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And maybe that's the message that God has to say to you today, "Arise and go" In other words, God is saying, "this is what I want you to do, but you need to make the effort to get up and do it."

Now Saul's travelling companions seem to have heard a sound but were unable to understand the words spoken according to Acts 22:9. And although according Acts 26:14 they all had fallen to the ground, they "stood," in a state of speechlessness. And so when Saul got up, he was blind, so his friends had to lead him by the hand into the city and for three days, he prayed and fasted, unwilling, or unable, to take food because of the tremendous shock he had received on the Damascus' road.

John Newton was a rough, dirty sailor with a foul mouth and an appetite for rotten living. He hated life and life hated him. He was captain of a slave ship. Then someone placed in his hands a copy of Thomas a Kempis' The Imitation of Christ. He also had the gift of a good mother who told him about the Savior when he was young. And then he was saved.

He went all over England sharing his faith. Well past his "retirement" age, he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath.

One Sunday, while delivering his message he repeated the sentence: "Jesus Christ is precious." His helper whispered to him: "But you have already said that twice." Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." "Jesus Christ is precious!"

When Saul of Tarsus had an encounter with the risen Lord, he knew from that moment on that Jesus Christ is precious. Loved ones, we've all been on that road in some way or another. Colossians 1:21-23 "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

We've all been persecutors of "the Way." Paul says we have all been on that road because we were alienated and enemies of God but now just like Paul we have become His servants. Paul thought he was on the road to Damascus but God changed that plan and put him on the road to salvation. Most people here today were heading on some road to a destination they had in mind. But whenever you had your own personal encounter with Jesus through His written word and you listened and done what God says within that word, God has turned your life around and put you on the road to salvation.

And the reason that happened was because when you we're trying to go through life alone, God was preparing His people to meet you on that road so that they could show you the road of salvation. And that's what Luke tells us happened next. Acts 9:10-16 "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Now notice what Luke records here in verse 10, he says that "a certain disciple," not an apostle or preacher, a disciple of Christ saw a vision from the Lord. Now this must have been a bit of a shock for Ananias to hear the Lord tell him to go to Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus. It must have been even more of a shock when the Lord said Saul was praying and had seen, in a vision, a man named Ananias coming and putting his hand on him so that he might receive his sight. And here is another example of God asking someone to get up and go.

But Ananias was scared and hesitated to do what the Lord asked him to do but I think that's understandable. Ananias knew all about the persecution in Jerusalem and the letters Saul carried from the chief priests which gave him authority to bind any Christians he found in Damascus. Wouldn't you be afraid of Saul? But the Lord was aware of Ananias' fear as He is aware of your fear and He told him, that Saul was specially chosen to take his Name to the Gentiles, kings and the Jews.

And so loved ones, if you have ever wondered why you were chosen to be a Christian, here is one reason why. To take the Name of Jesus to others. A family went to church one day and it happened to be Palm Sunday. But because of a sore throat, five-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with a baby sitter. And when the family returned home, they were carrying several palm branches. And so little Johnny asked, "What they were for." And his older brother explained to him that "People held them over Jesus' head, as he walked by." Little Johnny became upset and said, "Wouldn't you know it, the one Sunday I don't go, He showed up!"

You see loved ones, Jesus is coming back one day to take us to heaven and we as a church have only got a short time here on this earth to tell as many people as we can about how Jesus is the Way to heaven. You know sometimes I think the Lord's church is greedy sometimes, we have all these blessings from being in Christ; our salvation is already taken care of if we remain faithful until we die. But sometimes we're not very good at telling others that they can have these wonderful things too and maybe that's because of fear.

Salvation is not only ours to keep, but it's ours to share. **Do you know what we possess?** We possess the answers to life and death. Now we may not possess all the answers but we do possess hope which is something the world hasn't got. **1 Peter 3:15 "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."**

We possess that don't we? If someone asked us why we are a Christian, if anything we can tell them about the hope of heaven **couldn't we?** We can tell them about what happened on our road to Damascus **couldn't we?** Using our Bibles we can show them **the Way, couldn't we?**

You see unlike the experience of Saul and Ananias God is not going to show up in some vision and tell you to go somewhere and do something like some people claim today. Because Jesus has already revealed that to us in the Great Commission as recorded in **Matthew 28:19+20**. Where He tells us to go and then tell us where to go, **"into all the world."**

Because you see loved ones, when Peter was dealing with these very questions about Jesus coming back, a lot of people were asking, **where is this Jesus? When is He coming back?"** And so Peter answers the critics by saying in **2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"**.

The reason we have to tell others is because God is holding off coming back because there is someone out there that He wants you to go to and tell them about His Son Jesus. And so just like He tells us to go and do His will, He tells Ananias to go and do His will.

Acts 9:17-19 "Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "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." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again".

Now it's interesting that Ananias calls Saul **"Brother,"** perhaps because they were both from fleshly Israel, or in anticipation of Saul's impending baptism which would result in his being one of God's children in Christ. We don't really know but we do know that Saul's sight was miraculously restored through the laying on of Ananias' hands and, according to **Acts 2:38**, Saul received the gift of the Holy Spirit after he was baptized.

I remember talking with Jenny a few months ago about having an operation on her eye to have her cataract removed and she told me her friend had this done and he could see perfectly again. You see some people are just physically blind which is bad enough but most people in the world suffer from another kind of blindness.

Funmi and I have a friend called **Glynn** whom we met when we were at the Bible school. Now Glynn teaches Bible school every now and then and he goes on mission trips all over the world. He is a remarkable Christian and teacher of God's word, but let me tell you why he is even more remarkable, he is totally physically blind. And I remember listening to him preach one time and he says that many people feel sorry for him because of his disability but do you know what his response to that was? **"It's not as bad as those who are spiritually blind."**

Paul tells us in **2 Corinthians 4:4 "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God"**. Saul saw the light in more ways than one and it changed the direction of his life forever. And let me tell you what happens when the blind are healed spiritually, they see things for what they really are.

And when they see things for what they really are their immediate response will be the same as the Jews in **Acts 2:38-41**, the Samaritans in **Acts 8:5-12**, the Eunuch in **Acts 8:26-40** and Saul of Tarsus here in **Acts 9:18**. **"He got up and was baptized."** Here is a man who once a persecutor of **the Way of Christ** but is now a follower of **the Way of Christ**.

Loved ones, just like Saul who shared his testimony three times within the **Book of Acts**, we all have a testimony to share with the people we meet everyday. God gave Ananias the miraculous capability to physically heal Saul from his physical blindness and God has given us the ability through the Bible to heal people who are spiritually blind.