

The Road to Damascus

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Acts 9

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While awaiting his execution in a Roman prison, the apostle Paul penned these words to Timothy his son in the faith: *“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8).* For this devoted servant of Christ, it was a clear acknowledgement that the course he had been running for many years was nearing its conclusion. It was a course filled with many experiences—with fruit for Christ, but one also with fightings without and fears within (2 Cor. 7:5). This “good fight”, the fight worth fighting had its share of battles and blessings, but through it all he could gratefully proclaim, “I have kept the faith”. What he had received of the Lord, he had faithfully delivered to others also. By this, Paul affirmed that “every work for Jesus will be blessed”—and rewarded—with a crown from the righteous Judge on that Day which he anticipated receiving with much assurance because he loved His appearing.

Fittingly, the course of his ministry given to him by the Lord also began on a road, the road to Damascus. One wonders if this aged servant of the Lord could not help from reflecting on the events that led up to that life-changing day when the Voice called to him from heaven; *“Saul, Saul”, why persecutest thou Me?”* (Acts 9:4). That dramatic event would instantaneously transform the life and redirect the determined steps of this ardent persecutor of the Church—and it all began on a road. Yet, it was not the road that made the difference. It was the Redeemer, the One he met on that road. Like many believers, Paul must have had a special regard for the place where God performed such a mighty work in his life. For him, it represented a confluence of events and circumstances that were used by the Lord to bring this highly influential luminary to his knees.

What did the Road to Damascus represent?

One thing that the road to Damascus must have represented to this prisoner in chains was the progressive nature of sin. We are first introduced to this promising young upstart in Judaism as the one to whom the angry mob laid down their clothes outside Jerusalem to stone Stephen, the first recorded martyr of the Church (Acts 7:58). Saul was highly respected in the minds of many of his Jewish brethren. Even though he did not actively participate in this sad event, it was not long before his dormant hatred of the followers of the Way was manifested. At first, his actions are simply described as “consenting unto his death”. But this contrary attitude soon gave way to an open hostility as he *“made havoc of the Church, entering every house and haling men and women, [and] committed them to prison”* (Acts 9:3). No doubt his own hatred for Jesus of Nazareth fueled the great persecution that arose against the Church in that day. It was not long however before he was *“breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord”*, (Acts 9:1). His hatred for the Lord escalated as it invariably does with many anyone who is not “for” Christ. It reflects the built in bias that every son of Adam has for the things of God, a bias that deepens unless there is a yielding to the Savior. It is substantiates the progressive nature of sin.

The road must have also represented to Paul persecution of Christ and His Church. After his conversion, Paul mentioned more than once how he had persecuted the Church and tried *“to waste it”* (Gal. 1:13), how he had been a *“blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious”* (1 Tim. 1:13). So ashamed was he of his past deeds, that he seemed to lament his former life, referring to himself as the *“least of all his saints”* (Eph. 3:8). It was as if Paul could not forgive himself and get past these former misdeeds. And yet, he did. On that road, he was made to realize in dramatic fashion that his persecution against the Church was actually persecution against Jesus of Nazareth. When the voice came from heaven saying: *“Why persecutest thou me”*, it was actually the glorified risen Head, identifying and suffering with His Body, the Church. Ironically, the Lord never used these words in the days of His flesh when He was tried, buffeted, nailed to the Cross, mocked and pierced in His side. Such is the love that the Lord has for His Pearl of great price, that for which He *“went and sold all that He had and bought it”*, with the price of His own blood (Matt. 13:46; Acts 20:28). Saul’s hatred for the Church only revealed His hatred for the true things of God, though he like others mistakenly believe they are serving God in all “good conscience” (Acts 23:1).

The Providence of God

The road to Damascus like other places where people find the Lord had some painful reminders to the apostle Paul. But it also had some positive reminders as well. The swirling currents of divine activity in the lives of people all have a part in the plan of salvation. One positive reminder is that it represented the providence of God. It was evident that His hand was at work behind the scenes in Saul's life. In the Ethiopian's case and in Cornelius', salvation came through the preaching of the Word, one personal and the other public. One person was Hamitic, black and other was Japhetic, white. Saul was a Semitic. With him, there was no human agency involved in his salvation as with the others—or so it seemed. Interestingly, when he would later write to the Christians at Rome, he identified Andronicus and Junia, his kinsmen "*who were in Christ before me*" (Romans 16:7). It would be hard not to conclude that these redeemed relatives of Saul of Tarsus were not laboring in prayer for the salvation of their family member who waged such a vicious war against the Church. When Saul was struck down, the Lord asked why he was kicking against Him. It was obvious that Saul's conscience was already being accosted by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the hand of God was moving in response to the effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous. We should all be encouraged: God saves all types of people from all walks of life and through different means. He did with Saul and He can do the same today. Keep praying!

But the road to Damascus also represented even more than this to the apostle Paul. With all that transpired on the stretch of road that day, one thing was sure when it was over: Saul of Tarsus was now a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and a course of ministry had already been prepared for him by the Lord. When the stricken and trembling Saul inquired, "*Lord, what will thou have me to do*", the answer came back, "*Arise, go into the city and you will be told what you must do*" (Acts 9:6). It represented the immediate prospect for service that corresponds to and complements the work of salvation. It was not presented in detail at first, but would unfold in the course of time. It was partly revealed to Ananias prior to his meeting with Paul (Acts 9:6) and later acknowledged by Paul himself at his defense before Agrippa (Acts 26). Never did Paul presume upon his own steadfastness. When meeting with the Ephesians elders, he related to them that he did not count my life dear to himself, that he *might* finish his course with joy. He understood the need to be dependent upon the Lord, to serve Him with all sincerity and to commit his way to the Lord in prayer, all things we must do in our walk with the Lord. Having stated accentuated all the more the words when he would later write to Timothy to the glory of God: "*I have finished my course*". It was a testimony to God's faithfulness to Him and why he could say with growing conviction to the Philippian believers: "*He that began a good work in you will complete it at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 1:6).

For the Apostle Paul, the road to Damascus represented many things. But foremost in his mind, certainly was the fact that it represented the place where mercy and truth met him and where he came to know the Lord. The course begun on that road is a similar to the one that we must all run and to run it well until we reach the streets of glory.

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