

## The Explosive Church

### (4) Danger Looms

**Acts 9:1-31** introduces us to someone who must surely be regarded as a rocket in the fireworks sparked off by the creation of the Church. Saul - or Paul, as we know him - is judged by some to be among the 6 most intellectual people who have ever lived. He had an impressive background, as listed in **Philippians 3:4-6** - of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, faultless in his legalistic righteousness. Contrary to popular belief, he did not change his name when he became a Christian. "Saul" was his Hebrew name and in light of his past he was discreet enough to use that in the early days of his ministry, which was among the Jews. Later, on his missionary journeys when his Roman citizenship protected him to a degree, it was sensible that he reached out to the Gentiles by changing to his Roman name.

Paul was born in Tarsus, an ancient city near the Mediterranean Sea, just "around the corner" from Syria in what we know today as Turkey. When Persia was in power it was the seat of a provincial governor, and the centre of a lumbering and linen industry. Before the birth of Christ it was the home of a philosophical school, a university town where the intellectual scene would be coloured by lofty Greek thinking. Standing at a confluence of East and West, Tarsus was a pot-pourri of the wisdom of the Greeks, the world-order of Rome, and Oriental mysticism. This meant that a keen-minded Jew, born and bred in the city, could draw from the best of many worlds and interpret everything through the strong basis of his own religion.

The fact that Paul held Roman citizenship indicates he came from a family of some wealth and position. This was no doubt useful later, when he was often afforded respect by the Roman authorities, and having some means of his own would have been a great help in his life of itinerant evangelism. He was able to afford the comfort of his own rented house for 2 years in Rome, while he was under house arrest. The influence of Paul's multi-national education becomes evident in his writings in the New Testament. There is a Grecian logic in his mode of argument, and an appreciation of the Roman concept of empire upon which he could well build his master-plan for the evangelisation of the world.

Paul's formal religious education was at the feet of Gamaliel, honoured as among the best of Jerusalem's Pharisees, and here was ingrained in him - apart from a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures - the vested interests in the maintenance of Judaism, the rigid adherence to orthodoxy and an opposition to any attempt at innovation as being heretical. The fact that Paul was giving approval to Stephen's death (**chapter 8:1**) implies that he had a casting vote and may have been a member of the Sanhedrin. For this a man was required to have reached years of discretion, he must not be a dicer, a usurer, a pigeon-flyer or a desecrator of the Sabbath. He must be without bodily blemish, stainless in character, learned in science, acquainted with more than one language, and with a family of his own because a husband and father would be considered less inclined to harshness and to cruelty than those without a wife and children! It is ironic that such high-minded men as qualified for the Sanhedrin were the ones to condemn Christ to death and to instigate bitter persecution of the Church!

It is small wonder then, that **chapter 9** begins with "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." Many Christians had fled to Damascus at the persecution that had broken out in Jerusalem and Saul, not content with herding the local believers into prison, asked for the high priest's permission to treat the Damascus refugees likewise. The Sanhedrin had authority over Jews both in Judea and elsewhere: Saul must have wielded considerable influence for his request to have been granted.

Yet we do wonder if there was some great battle going on within his soul which he was trying to subdue by his misguided zeal against followers of "the Way." What had been his impressions as he had watched the steadfast, calm and courageous Stephen? In later life he referred to this 8 times, an indication of the deep impression it had made on him. Blaiklock<sup>1</sup> says that Saul at that time was a tormented man, not only

impressed, but convicted by the incident, borne out by the fact that he accelerated his persecution of the Church. A convicted man sometimes contrives to crush conviction in fierce activity. **Acts 26:11** shows that Damascus was only one of the places he went to on his fanatical mission.

***Who do you consider to be the most dangerous enemies of the Church? Why? Have you ever come up against the anger of a pricked conscience when you have talked to someone of Christ?***

Damascus was in the Roman province of Syria, the nearest important city outside Palestine, with a large Jewish population. It lay 240 kilometres northeast of Jerusalem, a journey of 4-6 days, so that Saul would have had plenty of time to think on what he was about to do. Was he wondering why this band of men could die for Someone who, he was convinced, was a dead impostor? The loving concern he had seen exercised among the believers, stood in stark relief against his reluctant but growing sense of the failure of Judaism. Perhaps this intellectual giant was grappling with evidence he found hard to deny, a conviction that could not be silenced.

***Very rarely do people come to a sudden faith in Christ: one's journey is usually marked by many small steps that culminate in that decisive moment. Can you remember steps that led you to Christ?***

Whatever the case, suddenly Saul was confronted by a blinding light, even brighter than the noonday sun, and a voice from heaven. As one steeped in rabbinic tradition, Saul would have immediately understood that such a voice was none other than that of God Himself, and the use of his name twice, would have over-awed him. Humbly he asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

Can you imagine his shock, the mind-boggling wonder, when Saul heard the answer - "I (i.e. the God you think you are serving with such zeal) am *Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" When he recounts this story in **Acts 26:14**, he adds the words, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads," which gives weight to the theory that he had been struggling with his conscience for some time. At once any feeble arguments he could have summoned were dispelled. We stand amazed at the grace of God, that He should afford this rebellious bigot a vision of the risen Christ - a life-changing vision that also qualified Saul to be ranked among the apostles. And now, that risen Christ began the change already, commanding this organising, domineering leader to proceed into the city of Damascus and wait until he was told what to do! Bound into helplessness because he had been blinded by the light, Saul was led into the city, at the mercy of others, and there, wrapped in darkness with his trauma, he sat for 3 days without food or water: and he had time to think! Twice more in Acts, and also in his epistles, Saul recounted the whole story of his conversion: the wonder of it was never to leave him.

***Can you imagine the state of Saul's mind during those 3 days? What would he be remembering? What would he be mulling over? Would he be matching up some Old Testament prophecies with what he had heard about Jesus? Have you had an experience like that, when God has given you an unmistakeable revelation, and then left you to use your own commonsense to work out the rest?***

But God was still at work. **Verses 10-17** tell the lovely story of Ananias, a believer who was open to hearing a voice from God. His fear at being told to visit Saul was understandable, and he was quick to inform God just how bad was this man - forgetting God already knew! Yet God in His mercy kindly explained to Ananias that He had prepared Saul for this encounter, and that He had a particular mission for Saul, **verses 15,16**. Notice here that God lists the Gentiles before the Jews: the new day had dawned! Look up **2 Corinthians 11:23-33** for a list of the sufferings Saul did indeed endure in accomplishing his mission for God. So Ananias, encouraged, obeyed his Master, and because of this he fulfilled a supremely important role in the life of a much more celebrated character. Of course, God could have so easily given Saul back his sight with the Divine touch that blinded him, but then Saul would have missed out on that first, healing experience of true Christian fellowship, and Ananias would have missed out on a rare privilege. As it was, Ananias courageously went to

Saul and in the epitome of Christian grace, he laid loving hands on this new believer and called him "*Brother Saul*." Saul never forgot that first touch of agape - unconditional, Christlike love, for in **Acts 22:13**, in retelling the story, he used the word "brother" again. Most probably, during his 3 days of darkness, Saul would have considered that his new outlook on Christ would cost him all his former friends. This is the only time we hear of Ananias in the Scriptures, but what a lesson we can learn from him!

***Do we treat new believers as "brothers"? Compassion is vital to the health of a new Christian. And do we feel we haven't done much for God? If in your whole life you are only called upon to do one significant thing for Him, and you do it well, your life will have been worth living!***

A new life began for Saul. In **verses 18-22** his transformation becomes evident: the scales fell from his eyes, spiritually as well as physically, and he took his first step of obedience to Jesus as he renounced his Pharisaic heritage by being baptised. Was Ananias the one to baptise him? Were the other believers there overcome with joy and astonishment? It is interesting to note that this new believer who was to become a giant in the Christian world, learned his early lessons from a bunch of ordinary, anonymous people!

Having eaten and regained his strength, Saul was quick to put his new convictions into action, preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, much to the incredulity of the Jewish congregations. (**Verses 20-22**). In **verse 23** "after many days" actually signifies 3 years, according to **Galatians 1:17,18**, spent partly in neighbouring Arabia, away from Damascus. No doubt this was a time of revelation, deep thinking and learning for Saul, who had missed out on the 3 years of training the other apostles had had with Jesus on earth. But back in Damascus this "rocket" created disturbing big bangs, and just as he had been furious with the followers of Christ, so the traditional Jews were angry enough to try and kill him. (**Verses 23-25**.) His fellow-believers helped him escape by lowering him in a basket from an opening in the wall - an exit no more dignified than his entry had been. Already he was beginning to "suffer for the name of Jesus."

Sadly, **verses 26-30** recount that the Christians in Jerusalem were not so open-hearted as those in Damascus, and cynically recoiled from him. That would have been a deeper suffering: his epistles reveal that he had a sensitive heart. And here that lovely "Son of Encouragement" Barnabas, stepped in. He believed in Saul: he brought him to the apostles and told them his story, and at last he was accepted. Once again he zealously preached all over the city, and once again the Jews tried to silence his arguments, until it was expedient for the believers to shunt him off home to Tarsus.

We wonder how Saul felt: was he an utter failure? In spite of his enthusiasm, it seemed nobody wanted to be convinced. Now he was getting a taste of his own medicine! But God was in control: Saul still had a lot to learn. His ministry had hardly begun.

***Could Saul have understood God's working in his life? He had to learn to trust - and so do we!***

We could smile wryly at the juxtaposition of **verse 31** - now the Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace! God in His grace encouraged them through His Holy Spirit and it was a time of deepening and growth.

<sup>1</sup>E.M.Blaiklock, Bible Characters and Doctrines, Vol.13, Study 30, Scripture Union, London