



The time is, about 18 months to 2 years after Jesus' death and Resurrection. The excitement began on the steps that lead up to Solomon's Porch, just outside of the Jerusalem temple. You see, the new Deacon Stephen loved to debate with others about who Jesus really was. He was very knowledgeable in the Torah, he was quick on his feet, and he was able to speak in Hebrew and Greek with great fluency. Things were going well, when all of a sudden a man from Cilicia joined into the debate. This man seemed well schooled in the Torah; he spoke like a scholar, and it was obvious that this man hated the idea of Jesus. The debate all of a sudden grew in intensity and volume, and unknown to Stephen, just off to the side, temple guards were moving toward them. It was then that I saw a smirk come across the Cilician's face. He screamed, "*Grab the Heretic!*" You see, he believed that part of obeying God's law was to be vigilant concerning those who *'transgressed God's covenant and were not keeping the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment, which said that no Jew should 'have any other God before me'.* *If they did, you needed to publically denounce them, accuse them of heresy, and then stone them.* They dragged Stephen before the counsel, and although he spoke well they began to shout, "*Kill the heretic, knock his teeth out!*"

Let me tell you what happened next. According to Jewish law, they led him just outside the city walls, then bound Stephen's hands to his sides, and dropped him into a hole at least twice his height onto his back hoping he would die in the fall. Then the person who brought the charge against him would pick up a huge boulder, step to the edge of the hill and drop the stone onto his chest in an attempt to crush his ribs and explode his heart, and if that didn't happen, then the rest of the mob would throw boulders down on him until he was killed. Stephen survived the fall, survived the boulder striking his chest, and it was then that he was given a glimpse into heaven and saw the resurrected Jesus standing at God's right hand. *Steven fixed his eyes on Jesus*, and then as the rocks struck him, breaking his body, he said, "*Jesus receive my spirit. Jesus don't hold this sin against them'.* And then he died. Can you imagine what it must have been like to watch that horrible scene? How would you have responded? Look at Saul's response in Acts 8:60. Standing above the broken dead bloodied body of Stephen, Saul was high fiving the men who killed him. Actually, I believe that Saul was probably the person who was a key witness who brought the charges against Stephen to the Sanhedrin (the Church counsel). That leads me to want to ask a simple question. What kind of man was Saul really?

### Saul: The Man

His Background (Acts 9:1-2): This is what we know: Saul was born in the University town of Tarsus in the area of Cilicia. He was a rich kid; his parents were in the Tent making

business, probably having their head office in Tarsus and a branch office in Jerusalem. But despite the fact that he was Jewish he amazingly held Roman citizenship papers (we will talk more about this at a later date, but it was something that was almost impossible to get, but Saul had it). Listen to how he described himself in Phil 3:4,5 *"I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more ...<sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin (Priestly tribe) , a Hebrew of Hebrews"* (that meant that he had kept ALL of the dietary rules and laws since he was a boy. There were 100's of rules; complex and hard to fit into ones daily life); *in regard to the law, a Pharisee"* (a passionate rule keeper of the highest order).

Acts 22:3, *"Then Paul said: <sup>3</sup>I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. (Jerusalem, which he probably moved to when he was 13 to begin his studies to be a Rabbi, made easier by his parents having a 2<sup>nd</sup> home in Jerusalem). Under Gamaliel, who was one of the top Jewish scholars in the world, Saul had to be rich and brilliant to study under him. "I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today."* Don't miss the fact that he was learned, zealous, capable and unstoppable. He had risen to a place of respected leadership as a rabbi and was destined for greatness, probably a seat on the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, which was the top religious job in the Jewish world. This guy made keeners look like slackers. Plus, in Acts 22:4 it says *"I persecuted the followers of this Way (Remember Jesus said 'I am the Way the truth and life', the name The Way had stuck to them) to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison"*. Paul was probably 30 years old when Stephen was killed. He was passionate enough, well connected enough, and trusted enough by the Religious upper escalante to be given the task of wiping out these heretics who were known as The Way.

I believe that Saul is the Cilician who is mentioned in Acts 6:1 who debates with Stephen. I believe that in Acts 7:58 when it mentions that those who stoned Stephen laid their coats at Saul's feet, it was because he was the official representative of Sanhedrin who reported back that the job had been done well. Then Acts 8:1-3 gives us a look into Saul's heart. Stephen's death excited Saul with the possibility of wiping out these people who were heretics because they weren't following his God. Here he follows up any rumour he can find about these Christians and does a house to house search beating the men, dragging the women out of their homes in chains (in front of their children) and carting them off to jail to be beaten, and probably killed. When these Christians started to flee the 217 km. north to Damascus he decides to hunt them down even if he needed to travel to a different country to do it.

His Beliefs: When I get this picture of this preacher, running his own personal inquisition, I find myself asking how that could happen. He had been raised in a godly home, he had been raised reading the Torah which is full of God acting in loving gracious ways with people, he was taught by *Gamaliel* who was a gracious moderate teacher (Acts 5:35), and he had seen Stephen die with a gracious confidence in the Jesus. So what happened? How could he be so religious, and yet so harsh, hard and uncaring?

A number of years ago, when the last Pope was in Edmonton, I was invited to sit on the stage during one his masses. As I prepared for the service inside St. Joseph's Basilica another Baptist pastor (Independent Baptist), was marching up and down outside with a placard calling the Pope the Whore of Babylon. He was just like Saul.

What happened? While they may have begun their faith journey with best intentions something happened along the way. They started to define themselves not by the time they spent with God, but how much they knew the scriptures. And it wasn't long until they were convinced that they knew more than anyone around them. Here is where it gets dangerous. Saul probably backed up his wrong beliefs with scripture. For there is an Old Testament verse that says '*cursed be anyone who hangs on a tree*', and so Saul twisted that verse to justify in his mind why Jesus couldn't be the Messiah. But when people's hearts feel cold they often step up their DOING, their ACTIVITY. And when that left them feeling empty, they moved to building their own System of Beliefs that were full of Rules to be kept, and ostracized all those who weren't as good at keeping their rules as they were. When taken to the extreme, which is how so many terrible things have happened in the name of religion.

Now, while most people don't go that far, the scary part is that it is so easy to let rules define our faith rather than an encounter with Jesus. To let the fact that we are connected to a specific denomination, church, some religious personality, or a past religious experience and let that make us feel connected to God, the result is that we end up like Saul. We feel connected to God when really, we are far from Him.

Often when people find out that I am a minister they seem to have this need to convince me that because they were baptized as an infant, went to church as a kid, know some Jesus stories or have done so many good things, that they must be connected to God. But here was Saul, who had more religious connections and credentials than most. He had worked hard to keep all the rules of his church, he was willing to even do tough tasks for 'god's sake', and when he is described in Acts 9:1 he sound far from happy, far from godly, and far from having a faith that thrilled his soul. So here is the simple question: would you describe your faith walk as *alive, warm, satisfying, real, and growing you closer to God? Is it possible that you have*

*been drawn into a Religious lifestyle instead of a relationship with God? If you feel that way let me continue with the story.*

### **Saul: The Encounter [Blinded by the Light]**

**Acts 9:3-9** Back to the story. 9:2 says that Saul headed toward Damascus where he had heard that there was a Christian group getting established. The problem was that he had to travel 215 km to get there (about a weeks walk), and because he was a Pharisee who kept his religious rules to the letter of the law he probably walked alone, way out in front of the Sanhedrin soldiers who weren't as 'godly' as he was. He had to walk through the Galilee area where Jesus had been rumoured to do so many miracles.

I am sure the face of Stephen at the time of his death, and the reaction of other Christians he had hauled off to jail flashed in front of his face, but he keep pushing them aside because he knew he was right. As he neared Damascus, the road climbed a mountain and then began to descended into the valley, when all of a sudden at midday a flash of light brighter than 10 suns seemed to sear his eyes, and then the roar from the sky was heard in which he, and those around him heard these words "*Saul...Saul ... why do you persecute me*". I am sure time stood still for Saul, while his eyes burned with unbelievable pain, and the words '*persecute me*' seemed to hang in the midst of the air. His whirling thoughts began to ask, who he had been persecuting. Then, just when he had this horrible feeling overwhelmed him that maybe the voice from the clouds could be... oh I hope it isn't ... Jesus. He heard himself reply to the voice with the question '*Who are you, Lord*' (and his mind went, *don't be him, please don't be him*). The voice replied, '*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*' (and his mind said oh, no it is him. *I'm toast*). The voice continued, "*Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you are to do*". Not overly comforting was it? He lay there half conscious for a long time. When they rolled him over his eyes looked like they had been scorched by a welder flame (Acts 9:7-8) and they helped him stumble into Damascus.

There he sat, in the dark for three days, trying to process all he had believed against WHAT, and especially WHO he had just encountered as he had been blinded by the light. Three days to try and re-evaluate everything he had believed and done. For he could no longer run from the fact that Jesus was God, he was personal, and he had gone out of his way to make sure Saul met him.

One night on our Trip to Turkey our guide shared his faith Journey. He had been raised a Moslem. One day as a young boy he found himself, out of the blue using the term "Father Allah". His friend balled him out because a good Moslem does not believe you can be that intimate with Allah. As he grew he got deeper in the Koran, and his dedication lead him to

praying the set prayers 7 times a day. He even took the study farther, reading much of the same doctrine which Bin Laden read, and he was on the road to become a radical in his beliefs. But he was disappointed with how many Moslems don't live out their beliefs. He became so depressed; he climbed the wall in Izmir (Smyrna), got drunk, and was going to throw himself off the Castle ruins and kill himself. But he chickened out. The next day he met a black lady who seemed different, and she invited him to tea. However, he stayed up all that night drinking again, and the next day decided again to kill himself. Actually, he was in the process of giving away his very expensive coat to a man on the street when he emptied his pockets and found the ladies address. That night he went to her place and for the first time experienced Christians worshipping. He couldn't get over their joy, which seemed beyond anything he had ever experienced with his Moslem hyper-dedication (sounds like Saul). That night he walked home and the sky seemed so bright it almost blinded him. When he fell asleep that night he had a dream, and in the dream God came to him and said *'My son come here'*. Del said "he called me son, he was personal, he was my Father Allah, the one I had longed for all my life." That night he became a believer. Sounds a little like Paul's story doesn't it?

The point of both of these stories is that I believe that God chases us until we find him. So here is the question: Have you ever had an encounter with Jesus? Now I have given you two examples that seem grand and amazing. I can tell you that I have had a few times in my life when God has seemed to meet me in surprising, and I would add, supernatural ways. But most of the time there is no light show or booming voice, but instead it is a whisper from the pages of the bible, a breeze that has the presence of God as I walk in the mountains, or a feeling that He is near during prayer or worship. So, because it is so easy to pull a Saul or Del, and substituted religious actions for a relationship with God, I ask again, have you had an encounter with Jesus, have you replied like Saul and said, *'Yes Lord ... I will be under new management'*. Because being involved in Church/Religion and not knowing Jesus is close, but it is not the real thing.

### **Saul: The New Man [Extreme Makeover]**

Acts 9:10-15 (You see, even before he was a believer, Jesus already had a special ministry waiting for him) 16-17 (in the midst of his darkness Saul heard Ananias call him *Brother Saul* – one of the most beautiful and life changing words in scripture and I am sure in Saul's life. But this only happened because Ananias stayed obedient to do whatever his Jesus asked him to do) 18. Ananias was a brave and obedient Christian, who came and helped Saul begin his new life. He underwent a life transforming moment which he would add, was only one of many that happened along his journey with Jesus. What happened that day affected ALL the rest of his life.

So here is one more question. If we have had an encounter with Jesus, is it still affecting our lives today? Is it affecting how we speak to others, is it still affecting how we are involved in caring for others or being involved in ministries, or have we done our thing and it is now time at the old age of 25 – 45 – 55 – 70 to now sit back and let others serve Jesus as we watch. If that is true of Ananias then Saul would not have been cared for, and the course of history would have been changed. If that is how Saul felt, millions would not have been touched by the gospel of Jesus. I have heard this term *once saved, always saved*. Can I add *once saved, we need to always be involved in that salvation*, in growth, in ministry, and in the joy of it all.

### Conclusion

When you walk up to the Monastery on the Isle of Patmos right next to the cave where John received his revelation from Jesus, you will see an old, probably 100's of years old painting on the front of the small chapel. It depicts the story that happened in 316. In the midst of the Emperor Licinius persecution of Christians, 40 Roman soldiers near Sebaste were accused of being Christians. They were taken out in the middle of a cold winter, stripped naked and then told the following, *'if you do not recant your faith we will leave you outside until you freeze to death'*. They had built a huge sauna close to where they were freezing to death and added *'if you will turn from your faith you can walk into the sauna and all charges are dropped'*. A few hours into the process one freezing soldier left the group, recanted his faith, and entered the warmth of the sauna. But the others chose to stand on the ice and die rather than leave their faith. One of the soldiers whose job it was to guard these men was so moved by the depth of these 40 men's faith that he disrobed and took the place of the man who had left the group. Years later, Bishop Gregory of Nyssa said he became lax in his faith, ready to step back and not be as involved as he always had been when he had a dream of these 40 soldiers laying their lives down for their faith. But, in his dream the soldiers chased him back to his commitment with a stick. So that picture was placed on the wall to remind the monks to be faithful to their commitment and daily lived out their dedication to Jesus right to the end.

So here are the questions to take from the story of Saul on the road to Damascus:

- i) Have you had a life changing encounter with Jesus that has moved from Religion to a real walk with Jesus?
- ii) Are you presently living out that wonderful salvation with your life?

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