

“Kicking against the Goats”

- Acts 9:1-31 -

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1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 "And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 "And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. 20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. 21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. 23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. 26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. 29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. 30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. 31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

Arnold Dwight “Gatemouth” Moore was one of America’s most popular blues singers in the 1940s. Prolific gambler and womanizer, Moore was the tuxedoed toast of the blues world when he strode from the gambling table to the stage of Chicago’s Club DeLisa one December night in 1948. As Gatemouth tells the story, he walked out to the bar that night, and as he did he passed by one of the greatest preachers in Chicago who said to him, ‘Gate, I be waiting on you’. As Gatemouth went he went to the stage that night he tried to sing and inexplicably nothing came out, until, finally, he broke into the only thing he could sing...the old spiritual, “Shine On Me.” According to a columnist for Chicago’s African American newspaper the Defender, Moore

“ran off the stage and about seven blocks in the snow screaming and yelling ‘I’m saved.’” Gatemouth went on to spend the rest of his life as a preacher and evangelist for God.

The pages of history are full of people who have fought against God and His will, battled against His sovereign plan, His power, and His church, and have run with all their might to escape His call. The two men that stand front and center of the pages of our text today were two of those men. One from one side of the spiritual tracks and one from the other, yet both resisted God’s plan and bowing to His will.

As our account begins, it seems the very language of the text struggles to adequately describe the magnitude of the zeal and actions of one “Saul of Tarsus.” Saul was “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*” It seemed that every breath he took was threats and murder. Acts 8:3 tells us that Saul “*made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.*” It seemed that this guy was serious about his work. Who knows what drove the passion and hatred that boiled inside of him. Perhaps it was what possesses many men: *running from the sovereignty of the real and living Messiah. The refusal to allow God to call the shots. The rejection not necessarily of God in the strictest sense, but the denial of His Lordship over them.*

Our common embrace lies in the statement “Believe and you will be saved.” But Jesus said that men must “*be converted and become like little children*” or we will not enter the Kingdom of God. That statement clearly presents a scenario where our salvation must change us on a profound level. It leads us to the reality of mandatory humility, submission, and obedience. There is only *one way* to walk in the kingdom of God: *broken!* Saul was not about to do it. And many who walk amongst us will not either.

Note that Saul was not so much pursuing the *believers*, but the *disciples*. “Believers” are rarely persecuted for their position. It is the *disciple* who takes the heat. Such is the cost of selling out to Christ. Stepping up means the front line of the battle, in harm’s way, and the focus of the attack. That much has never changed.

Saul was a “papered” Jew. He was the quintessential Jew and he had loads of world clout. Philippians 3 says he was “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*” Galatians tells us “*he advanced in Judaism beyond many of (his) contemporaries in (his) own nation, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of (his) fathers.*” So Saul was no backwoods rightwing religious blogger. Saul was *the man*. Zealous, passionate, and unstoppable. He hunted down the followers of the Way, and hauled them into Jerusalem, 150 miles and a week’s journey away.

Like Gatemouth Moore, Saul’s meeting with Jesus would eventually become his salvation testimony. One could attempt to explain away the events that day on the road to Damascus, but in the end there was simply no way to write it off as some sort of psychosis. It would be best to get a good shovel if one attempts to go at it from that angle. God had moved in the miraculous. What happened on that road truly was a meeting between a man on the run and his Creator! Many of us have had similar moves of God in their lives, but unlike Saul a vast number of us have went on to inexplicably forget that day, and therefore it was like it never happened.

Despite the terrible things that he had done, there was an unmistakable air of grace in God’s words. ***Saul... Saul, ...why are you persecuting me?*** You see, Saul...*like so many who have followed in his shoes*, failed to understand that when you come after God’s kids, you are essentially coming after Him. When you dis’ His church, you are dis’ing *Him*...When you lie and hurt His people, you lie to and hurt HIM.

The idea behind the phrase “kicking against the goads” involves a sharp stick-like instrument to move the plowing ox onward. When the ox would kick back against the goad, he would only hurt himself in the attempt at rebellion.

Saul believed himself to be square with God, yet in truth he didn't even know Him when he was literally before Him! “*Who are you?*” Saul asked. Upon the reply of Jesus, suddenly Saul recognized the truth and power of this Being. It must have been an earth-shattering moment! Like a tidal wave, all the faces of those he killed and persecuted would have rolled over him. Everything that they had said *was all true! Jesus wasn't dead at all! He was alive, and He IS the messiah! “Oh no, what have I done?”*

What followed from the lips of Saul would be some of the most beautiful words ever spoken. Simply but profound words that would echo down through the ages of Christendom; words that would be repeated millions of times, words that would roll off of the lips of true followers and disciples throughout history. It would be the statement that would be the fork in the road of Saul's destiny as well as with many of us. Not “*Jesus save me,*” but rather “*Lord...what do you want me to do?*”

It is those heart-felt words that would throughout time reflect a transformed heart. Eyes that were once solely upon themselves turned to fall solely upon Jesus. Living that was all about self, was now all about Christ and His church. For it is those words which present a life upon the altar. Lives that seek not “what is in it for *me,*” but “*what can I do now for you, Lord?*”

For those who have come to salvation in Christ, God has given redemption, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, peace, and joy. He even now continues to shower us with blessings. Yet there is a belief that says “*Lord, what will you do for me?*” Then there is a different faith that acknowledges what has already been done upon the cross, and now asks “*what can I do for you?*” Saul...soon to be Paul the Apostle, was never one to simply believe. No, his belief *always* motivated Him to *action*. Whatever side he was on!

There were those there that day that “*heard the voice, but failed to see the Lord.*” They failed to **recognize** the voice. It is the same with every such incident. The chosen one will hear His voice and recognize who is behind it, while so many around him or her will fail to ever understand. Many who sit in churches each week “hear the voice” but fail to ever see the Lord.

For the three following days after this event Jesus was quiet. He does that sometimes. For three days Saul mourned. Neither eating nor drinking, he had three days to sit and try to wrap his mind around what had happened. But God did not forever leave Saul stewing in his misery. After three days God sent someone. Why did He wait so long? Why does He *ever* wait so long? Because God knows just *exactly* how long to wait. However, know this: eventually a man is expected to pull himself up off the mat and move.

Ananias was another individual who believed in God. He was willing to be **counted as a believer** but he had yet to come to understand what it **meant to be a disciple!** He too came to a crossroads of not just his life, but of his faith. And such was not the moment that he accepted Jesus as his Savior. It was the moment Christ called him to man up and step out. Ananias not only heard, he answered. Therein lies the crucible of Christian faith: He acted according to God's call: “**Here I am Lord.**”

Many great men of God have answered the Lord with those same words. Abraham in the book of Genesis, King Saul, Moses, Samuel, Jacob, and the prophet Isaiah. But please note that Ananias wasn't an apostle, or a deacon, or any high position within the church. He was just *a guy*. But a guy that God could use; a guy that could *and would hear* the voice of the Lord. A guy who answered when called. Thus, Ananias went from

obscurity, to the eternal pages of Scripture. He proved that the only prerequisite to be used in such a grand way was to simply answer, "*Here I am Lord*" when He calls.

Ahhh, but we see that Ananias flinched! Indeed. Thankfully, one need not be a perfect individual to be called and used. Praise God! What Ananias was being asked to do was to him a crazy notion. "*Go to Egypt and set my people free. Build a boat and I will send you two of every animal. Go to desert, I have someone for you to talk to. March around the city 7 times. Speak to the rock, and I will give you water. Pick up your staff ...Divide the water. Set down your nets and come and follow me. Leave LA and go to Nineveh...or rather Wisconsin and start a church.*" God has been asking folks to do some crazy stuff for thousands of years. And the ones who listened and acted, saw the hand of God manifest in front of them!

The sinful activities of Saul were legendary. Now the Lord was asking Ananias to do *this*? That would be like asking a Jew today to buy dinner for Adolf Hitler! Please note that God was not a ruthless taskmaster. God is SO patient! He graciously explained the situation to Ananias. The bottom line was that God had decided to make Saul His *chosen vessel*. Not ultimately Ananias himself, but someone else. But through Ananias, God moved to rock the world.

We cannot miss the fact that God didn't hide the fact from Saul that he was going to have to suffer. There was no "bait and switch." Life as a man or woman greatly used of God is always full of great blessings as well as great tribulation. That's the deal. That is why so most will seek the elusive middle or neutral road of a lukewarm relationship with God. So many folks who will indeed never experience the pain because of such, but they will never see the hand of God from the top of the mountain. They will never know their Savior up close and personal.

Once he received God's explanation...and trust me, such is not always forthcoming today, Ananias did not stand about and debate the situation with God. He got up and he moved...

So many individuals have repeated this story over and over again. Some who actively persecuted the church and *the Lord Himself* and now stand in His service. Some who fought to remain in the shadows were called out to move the world and answered that call, even in trepid fear. But the fact remains that many many more will spend their lives rejecting that message, doing their level best to ignore that voice and will run away when called to humble themselves as a child.

Ephesians 1:4 tells us that "*He has chosen us before the foundations of the world.*" We read that most often only as a "chosen for salvation." But I have news for you today. If He chose you for salvation, He chose you to serve Him. He chose you for a mission...for that crossroads. For that opportunity to change the world. ***Once we were blind, but now we see.***

Thankfully, God did not simply send these guys out to meet the enemy alone. He was there with them every step of the way. Saul was not only healed and baptized by water, but he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He received his calling, his healing, his preparation, and now his weapons. Saul was now equipped and *empowered for the battle ahead*. Jesus had now entered into his very being. This man was going to "*turn the world upside down.*" (Acts 17:6)

Saul wasted no time stepping up to the plate. He began immediately testifying of God. Oh, to have been there to hear that very first time he spoke of the reality of Jesus Christ! What a historic moment! I bet you could have heard a pin drop. Because of the obedience and faith of *one man*, the world would be shaken by another. This is

the way of the Kingdom of God. As we take our stand to declare the redemption of God, “*all who hear will be amazed...*”

Verse 23 says “after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him.” In the book of Galatians, Paul sheds some further light on just what “many days” means. In reality, Saul went to Arabia at this point for a period of roughly three years. **Three quiet years.** Three years of what? Well, if the training of God is consistent, *and it is*, Saul no doubt had three years of breaking, learning, and growing in the Lord. Even for Saul, there were no *short cuts!* If you want to be used as a man or woman of God, then settle in...for it is a long haul! Every great man or woman of God had a *wilderness experience* prior to being used profoundly by the Lord. The great **Oswald Chambers** once said “Before God can use a man greatly he must wound him deeply.” Yes, indeed.

What followed was a tide that had turned! He who was the “huntee,” was now the *hunted*. Some have pointed out that to be one of the hunted, in reality, is a strange flattery.

“No one persecutes a man who is ineffective and who obviously doesn’t matter. George Bernard Shaw once said that the biggest compliment you can pay an author is to burn his books. Someone has said ‘A wolf will never attack a painted sheep.’ Counterfeit Christianity is always safe. Real Christianity is always in peril. To suffer persecution is to be the greatest of compliments because it is the certain proof that men think we really matter.” (Barclay)

This is the precarious period of our faith that we each pass through. When the heat of persecution and tribulation arrives are we going to be a seed that has fallen upon the stony soil that is “withered away?” Or, will we survive this early testing of our faith and thrive in the bright sun to “bring forth fruit” for the Kingdom? Saul was of the latter camp. He was here to stay.

Those who held religious status in Israel immediately began to take matters into their own hands. For them, there was only one thing that was to be done: *destroy that which they perceived to be a threat to their power.* This is nothing new. Mankind has been doing this since Cain and Abel! Another mandatory passing for all servants of God, is the humbling of our spirit and our position in the kingdom. There is certainly nothing grand and flashy about being lowered over the wall in a basket and having to be smuggled out of town as Saul was!

The masses were of course afraid of Saul. Or at least his street cred: *murders, torture, persecution.* But Barnabus, the renowned “apostle of encouragement,” took the risk. He took a chance with this guy, when no one else would. Radical change has always been a source of doubt and suspicion. An unredeemed world knows nothing of this, short of the extreme of cults. The saved, while quick to embrace their *own* miracle, are often equally reluctant to acknowledge another’s miraculous conversion.

Although Saul was an independent individual, he still rightfully saw the crucial value of being a part of something bigger than himself. He could have just started an in-home church. Blazed his own trail. Went up the road and started his own ministry. But thankfully Saul apparently knew too much about what Scripture had to say on such matters, and refused to let some difficulties drive him into a solo and ultimately a self-righteous position. For Saul, it was *not about him*, it was about furthering the Kingdom of God. He knew that would not happen running alone in some self-anointed path.

Hooking up with some of the other apostles, Saul begins to minister with fervor. He *spoke boldly* in the name of Jesus and he *disputed* with the Hellenists. These Hellenists were the same ones that Stephen went up against and it cost him his life. Saul now goes “toe to toe” with the guys whose coats he held while they killed Stephan.

The result was the same as before: *they wanted to kill him too!* But Saul could not keep quiet. He was passionate and cared for others more than himself. He was now *living* for Christ, and living for His bride the church, and further, he was willing to *die* for that position. So *bring it on!*

Saul indeed was a “do or die” kind of guy, but God had given him brothers and sisters to watch over him. This is the way it is designed. There are no lone-ranger Christians. His new “family” saw the situation before them and apparently thought it a good idea to keep Saul alive to minister another day and thus shuffled him off to safety.

This kind of unity and corporate action is what fellowship and the church is all about. Through such battles and subsequent triumphs, the church finds *peace and edification*. It is clear that Saul found more than just an army to fight beside. He found a family in which to be a *part of*. Together they “*walked in the fear of the Lord,*” and **together** they knew the “*comfort of the Holy Spirit!*” To prove it, they were “*multiplied.*”