

Saul's Life is in Danger

Text: Acts 9:23-31

Introduction:

Following the conversion of Saul, we found him immediately preaching Jesus as the Christ, in the synagogues of Damascus; in the very synagogues, which he had originally planned to enter with documentation from the high priests, that would allow him to arrest any who were of "The Way," which he himself was now preaching! The Gospel has a way of doing that to a person, doesn't it? And naturally (and understandably), those in the synagogues, were shocked by what they heard! For, Saul's Pharisaic, anti-christian reputation greatly preceded him. But, we are told that Saul grew stronger and stronger in the faith, and he was able to confound the Jews, who lived in Damascus, proving from Scripture, that Jesus was the Christ, and the Son of the Living God!

This morning, we will find, what we ought always to expect, wherever the Gospel is faithfully preached...opposition. As Saul barrels through the gates of hell with the Gospel of "freedom in Christ," demonic opposition, working through the Jews (in this case), will contend with Saul, even to the extent of threatening his life.

I. Saul's Life is Threatened in Damascus

"Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him" (vs. 23).

Being unable to contend with Saul's grasp of the Scriptures, and the proven testimony he bore to Jesus, as the Christ, and recognizing that Saul was sticking around, preaching a message that contradicted the very foundation of the current self-confidence and self-righteousness of the Jews, the darkness had to do something about the penetrating light. The Gospel is an offense to those who are perishing, and they must get away from it, at all costs. And so, after many days pass, with Saul bringing the light of the Gospel into the synagogues and throughout Damascus, the Jews plan to kill him.

"But their plot became known to Saul" (vs. 24a).

God is in the business of protecting His servants, at least, until they have completed the mission for which they have been called. And even as we have seen God deliver David, time

and time again, from every form of opposition, God will preserve Saul, not unharmed, but alive, and able to bear witness to Christ throughout much of Israel, Asia Minor, Greece and even Rome! And here, God protects Saul, by causing the information concerning a plot to have him put to death, to be leaked out, so that he can escape, and have his life spared. And this plot to kill Saul was no small or impotent matter, as we will see in a moment.

"And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket" (vs. 24b-25).

The city was gated in, and so, the Jews arranged to have the gates guarded, waiting for Saul to exit, so that they could capture and kill him. We might wonder how they could command such power and influence in such a city as Damascus. But Saul gives us a little more insight into this reality in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, where we are told, "In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands."

Here, we find that the situation is a lot more serious than we might have originally believed. The Jews in Damascus had secured help from the governor, in order to execute their plan of killing Saul! He, in fact, set a garrison (an entire troop of soldiers) by the gate, waiting to arrest Saul, so that he could be killed! And so, the opposition was not merely religious, but political as well. But Saul's companions, at night, let him out through a window in the wall, lowering him in a basket, so that he could escape, not having to leave by way of the main gate. And so, Saul's life was preserved. But this is only the beginning of the persecutions and threats and sufferings, which Saul would face, throughout the course of his apostolic ministry. As the Lord Jesus had said to Ananias, Saul would suffer many things for the sake of His Name!

And so, Saul then decides to head back down to Jerusalem, where the Apostles were.

II. Saul's Life is Threatened in Jerusalem

"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" (vs. 26).

Understandably, the disciples at Jerusalem did not immediately receive Saul, as they were skeptical about the reality of his conversion. Remember, the last time they saw Saul, he was reeking havoc on the church, going from house to house, arresting Jesus' disciples, and casting men and women into prison. This served to push many disciples out of Jerusalem, and more

than likely, those who stayed, had to maintain a low profile. And so, the possibility that Saul would pose as a fellow disciple, as a means of penetrating the now cautious church, would certainly not be a "far out there" idea. Needless to say, the disciples at Jerusalem, at first, kept their distance from Saul, and did not believe that he was a true disciple.

"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" (vs. 27).

The last time, and the first time, we had heard of this man, named Barnabas, was back in chapter 4:36-37. There, we found that his real name was Joses, but the apostles had named him Barnabas, because he was a "son of encouragement." And furthermore, we were told that he was one of those, who had sold his land, laying the proceeds at the apostle's feet. Clearly, Barnabas was a well respected man among the apostles, and among all, for that matter. And here in chapter 9, we find him believing the best of Saul, when no one else would believe him. The same man, who was willing to let go of his property for the sake of the kingdom, was willing to risk his life for the kingdom as well. He believed the best of Saul, hearing of his conversion experience, and how he had met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, and had preached boldly at Damascus, in the name of Jesus. Barnabas will become a significant character in the Book of Acts, especially as he accompanies the Apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. And he will also prove again, to be a man who liked to believe the best of others, even as he had done here with Saul. Only later, this quality will be the very thing that separates Barnabas from Saul.

Needless to say, then, Barnabas serves as a bridge, bringing Saul into fellowship with the apostles and with the disciples at Jerusalem. [Note: Barnabas had to testify on behalf of Saul, to the apostles. The apostles did not have any prophetic revelation concerning this matter. Compare to the incident surrounding Ananias and Sapphira]

"So [Saul] was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out." Saul is accepted by the apostles and he begins to preach in Jerusalem, while remaining with them. Saul was no "Lone Ranger" Christian. When in Damascus, he stayed with the brethren, and served out of their base, until he had to leave because his life was threatened. And that is exactly what he will do here at Jerusalem. The one who was once aligned with the Pharisees, hunting down the disciples of Christ, was now among the hunted, having been aligned with the people of God!

"And [Saul] spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him" (vs. 29).

More than likely, Stephen was stoned to death, and martyred by Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews; Acts 6). And you will recall, Saul was the one who held the clothing of Stephen's murderers, when they stoned him to death. Now, Saul is facing the wrath of Hellenistic Jews, himself, and they attempt to kill him. Saul's life was probably especially threatened, because he had apostatized from Pharisaic Judaism, making his testimony sharper against the Jews. The very man, who once stood out, as a leader in the great persecution that had come against the people of God at Jerusalem, was now of "The Way," himself. Such a conversion would have been viewed as a great threat by the Jews. [Ex: Consider how Muslims treat fellow Muslims, who convert to Christianity!]. And so, as Saul boldly preaches in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputes with the Hellenists, they then attempt to kill him.

"When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus" (vs. 30).

The brethren, who once doubted the authenticity of Saul's conversion, now were diligent to protect him, as his life was threatened by the opposition. And so, they first bring him to Caesarea, and from there they bid him farewell to Tarsus, his native homeland, where he would be safe from those who wanted to kill him.

"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" (vs. 31).

The enemy had sought to flush out and destroy the Gospel, but he failed! The Jewish persecution did not hinder the spread of the Gospel, but rather, in fact, it served to spread it outward. Saul was converted, and now moved out of harms way, so that even that which was stirred up by his presence, was calmed. The Lord was establishing his church, and now he had granted her a time of peace and rest, and she was built up. By means of the preaching of the Gospel, by means of the continuous preaching of the will and teachings of Christ, and by means of the conversion of lost sinners (like Saul), the church was edified and growing! The Lord Jesus Christ was building His church, and the gates of hell could not prevail against it!

Indeed, there are difficult and trying times, which the church faces, but thanks be unto God, that the Lord Jesus Christ stands above it all, and at His whim, He can merely whisper,

"Peace, be still," and the winds and the waves will/must stop! Our Lord is indeed sovereign! And He will prosper His church! [Note: Even Saul's persecution, will serve to further drive him to minister among the gentiles]

Notice as well that the church multiplied as they "walked in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit." "Fear" and "comfort" were present together. They revered, honored and feared God. Their consciences were sensitive to the will and presence of Christ, and they thrived in the comfort of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit, who assured them both of their present state in grace, and of their future state in glory! They were governed by a healthy fear of God, and they were motivated by the ongoing comfort of the Holy Spirit, who continually reminded them of the sovereignty of God at work, in all things!

III. Concluding Thoughts

And so, following the conversion of Saul, we find him immediately preaching Jesus, as the Christ, and as the Son of God, and this opens up the gateway for persecution. Already, he has experienced persecution in Damascus and Jerusalem, and in both cases, his opposition sought to kill him, which led to his having to flee. And as we continue to follow the ministry of Saul, we will find that it doesn't get any easier. But there is a great motivation, which keeps him going, in spite of the ongoing persecution. [Read Acts 20:22-24]

AMEN!!!