

SAUL OF TARSUS

Part I

I find studying characters from out of the Bible to be most helpful. Rather than putting them on a pedestal, study them within their own setting, - the times in which they lived, their family background, etc, - ... and we realise they were ordinary people. One of the greatest characters in the New Testament is Paul ... but, who was he before the Lord saved him? Where did he begin in life? What kind of a person did God set apart to become the greatest ambassador of the Christian faith? ... Let's consider Saul of Tarsus.

He was living in Jerusalem at a time of great religious turmoil. The Jewish *status quo* was struggling because certain men had been preaching about a Jesus who recently had been crucified, but had been reported to have risen from the dead. Attempts to deny their message achieved no success for the preaching-witness of these ordinary men who claimed to be His disciples was compelling. Increasing numbers were believing in Christ as their Saviour and Messiah.

Some of them were hauled before the courts. They were required to give an account of themselves, [Acts 4:7](#) And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this? Undeterred and unashamed Peter replied, [10](#) Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. [11](#) This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. [12](#) Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

On another occasion, the opposition became so ferocious, [Acts 5:17](#) the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, [18](#) And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison. These were the events Saul of Tarsus was watching and witnessing ... and, of course, he was siding with those *against* these new followers of *The Way*. Nevertheless, [Acts 6:7](#) the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. [8](#) And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.... It was about time one of them was really made an example of! In fact, as far as the religious elite were concerned, [9](#) Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia [*Hellenistic Jews*], disputing with Stephen. [10](#) And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by

which he spake. ¹¹ Then they suborned men [*i.e. they persuaded some men to affirm*], which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. ¹² And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, ¹³ And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: ¹⁴ For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

Given such an opportunity, Stephen boldly defended the Gospel of Christ from the Old Testament Scriptures. However, the minds of those members of the Sanhedrin were not prepared to give any credence to what he was saying for ... **Acts 7:54** When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart [*furiosus, livid*], and they gnashed on him with their teeth [*they 'ground their teeth'*]. ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. ⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, ⁵⁸ And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. ... So, Saul was among those who put Stephen, - God's servant, the first Christian martyr, - to death. ... We shall return to that in a moment ...

Saul did not originally come from Jerusalem. By birth, he was a Jew. By citizenship, he was a Roman. And by education, he was a Greek. He came from the wealthy Roman city of Tarsus which is found about half-ways between the east and west of modern Turkey, and inland from the southern coast about twelve miles ... It was quite a distance from Jerusalem, - over 350 miles by land. It would have taken quite a while to travel. Tarsus was one of the top three learning centres in the Mediterranean (the other two were Athens and Alexandria). ... It was a privilege to come from there, and Saul was a very capable young man. ... He became a great man of God, but the first time we meet him was when he belonged to a murder squad, involved and intent on silencing the new Christian faith.



Some think the reason he was holding their coats while the others stoned Stephen indicates Saul was almost an innocent bystander, who wasn't fully integrated into this cruel band ... that he wasn't as culpable as those who threw the stones. It is argued, however, that because he was looking after the coats, he was the 'main man' ... the one who gave the order to stone Stephen ... Saul was the man with the authority, and he was telling the rest what to do! He was as guilty as the rest of them, **Acts 8:1** *And Saul was consenting [συνευδόκῶ, approved, supported ... The old 1534 Tyndale NT translates it, "Saul had pleasure in his death"]* unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles ... ³ As for Saul, he made havock [*... he set out to do as much harm as he possibly could ... nothing was off-limits! ... He instigated and spread such havoc!*] of the church, entering into every house, and haling [*σύρω, dragging*] men and women committed them to prison. ... There is no doubt about it, *he was bad!* He hated the church! He was no bystander, for he was 'in the thick of it!' ... It was his purpose and aim to obliterate and destroy every follower of "The Way". ... Get rid of them now when you can!

So, in the early days following Pentecost, Saul of Tarsus was busy wreaking havoc, - Darby described it, "Saul ravaged the assembly", and the *Complete Jewish Bible* says he "set out to destroy" them. ... This young man who would become the greatest of the servants of Jesus Christ, - its greatest exponent, - started off as being one of the fiercest opponents of the Gospel. It is testimony to how God's grace has the power to save its greatest enemies. ... There is none too hard for Christ to convert.

There was nothing innocent about Saul of Tarsus. His aim in life was to *crush* the preaching of the Gospel, and to stop its advancement. ... You might say, he was only doing what he believed, in keeping with how he had been brought up. No, for that is only making excuses for him ... It is not how he had been taught by his very gracious Jewish master, Gamaliel. We are told how, when Peter and John had been arrested, rabbi Gamaliel was asked for his valued opinion. With compassion and courtesy, he calmed the council, **Acts 5:35** *And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.* **36** For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. **37** After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. **38** And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: **39** But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. ... If Saul had been following his teacher Gamaliel's gracious manner, he would not have been chasing up and down the country after the Christians ... but the reason he was so against the Christians was because he hated and despised the Name of Jesus!

He was a proud Jew ... indeed, as all Jews are ... and he was all the more strict for being brought up outside of Jerusalem. ... It is like a visit we made to Gibraltar a few years ago ... Gibraltar is more British than any place in Britain ... and similarly the Jews in Tarsus were as determined concerning their faith, as was the most ardent Jew in Jerusalem!

Saul was the proud son of a proud Pharisee, and Saul himself was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). ... You did not become a Pharisee because your father was one ... you became a Pharisee by studying and by academic progression ... and Saul of Tarsus, - rabbi Saul, - had 'climbed the ladder' and to become a recognised Jewish leader. That is how he could address the Sanhedrin, "Men and brethren", for he qualified as one of them. Furthermore, in adherence to the Law of Moses, he was **Phil. 3:5** *Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; 6* Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless ... His credentials were impeccable, - he was the best of the best! He was Jewish from head to foot, and from inside out! ... And, on the practical side, like every Jewish boy in their teenage years, he had learned a trade, and for him it was the trade of weaving and making tents (Acts 18:3).

In keeping with tradition, his proud father would have sent him to Jerusalem when he was thirteen years of age, to be taught (Acts 22:3) by one of the most famous Jewish teachers, Gamaliel, a highly-regarded member of the council, a Pharisee ... a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people (Acts 5:34).

Under Gamaliel, Saul learned massive portions of the Old Testament ... if not every part of it. He could also have quoted to you from the writings of the rabbis. He knew his history. He knew his doctrine. He knew all the main men who needed to be known for Saul of Tarsus was a truly formidable Jewish Pharisaical rabbi. ... And that is how he was known in the Jewish circles, Saul *of Tarsus*.

Did he meet Jesus? Was he ever in the company of Jesus during His earthly ministry? I don't think he was for there is no mention or indication he did meet Jesus. ... It is more than likely Saul was in Tarsus during the three-and-a-half years Jesus was ministering. ... He would have been busily teaching, - establishing himself as a qualified rabbi. In his home-city he would have been passing on what he had learned during his studies in Jerusalem, at the feet of Gamaliel. No doubt, Saul was an accomplished teacher and rabbi, - his mind and intellect would have been full to overflowing with the doctrines and teachings of the Jewish faith. ... Every inch of him *oozed* the Jewish religion. You could not have argued with him! He was well-versed in everything to do with what he believed. He was as convinced, persuaded and indoctrinated as you could get! ... He was the kind of person you never ever would have thought would believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. ... It seemed so absolutely impossible!

And he didn't just teach Judaism ... By his own admission, he also persecuted, for he later confessed to the Corinthians, **1 Cor. 15:9** For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ... He told King Agrippa, **Acts 26:9** I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **10** Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. **11** And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

But despite Saul, God was actually using his cruelty to further the spread of the Gospel, **Acts 8:3** As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. **4** *Therefore* they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word ... Saul's persecution was a

means God used for the Gospel to enter new areas ... Because of what Saul was doing against the Church, the preaching of the Gospel moved outside of Jerusalem ... Philip travelled northwards to Samaria ... and he took the Gospel with him (Acts 8:5)! God was using Saul's persecution for the propagation of the Gospel! ... Saul was trying to stop people hearing about the Lord Jesus, but instead of stopping it, the Gospel message was spreading out from Jerusalem, to Judea, and even into Samaria, - just as Jesus had said on the Mount of Olives before He was taken up in the cloud into Heaven (Acts 1:8).

And not only would the Gospel be taken from Jerusalem, to Judea, and into Samaria ... but eventually it would also be taken to [the uttermost part of the earth](#) ... And who would the Lord use to for His purpose? He would use the man who was one of its greatest enemies, for that same man was later to write, [Gal. 1:3](#) For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: [14](#) And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. [15](#) But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, [16](#) To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen [*ἔθνος, Gentiles*]. ... On another occasion, he was standing on the steps in Jerusalem, and he started to give his testimony in the Hebrew language (Acts 21:40). All the people stopped, kept quiet and listened (Acts 22:1). He told them about God speaking in the temple (v.21), and saying to him, [18](#) Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me. [19](#) And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee: [20](#) And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. [21](#) And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.

I believe Paul sincerely regretted how he defended his Jewish faith. He could have made an excuse about his behaviour and said, Oh, that was the old days. ... But when you read such verses as Acts 21:19,20, surely you see the deep remorse over what he had done to Stephen, and the Christian men and women he had hounded and hurt. ... At the time, he was cruel, wicked, and callous ... If he *had* been in Jerusalem during the trial and death of Jesus, his name most certainly *would* have been mentioned, for he would have had to emphasise his opposition to the Saviour. ... But when the Lord saved him, he was made into a new creature ... The old Saul of Tarsus was left in the dust of the Damascus, and the Lord raised up a new man.

... That is as far as we shall go in our study this evening. We shall come back to it again, and examine the man who *did* rise up from that dusty road to Damascus ... What is the Lord teaching us so far? Surely, He is teaching us there is no obstacle to His saving power. He can soften the hardest of souls and make them as putty in His hands so that He forms out of them *a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work (II Tim. 2:21)*. It does not matter what you are like, or what you have been, ... as the hymn says ... *Jesus' blood can make the vilest sinner clean.*

For some people, the obstacles to believing in Christ have been constructed using bricks from the worst of blocks. For some other people, the obstacles to saving faith have included much fancier and more decorative materials, ... bathed in religion and self-righteousness, and good works. ... And that is how it was with Saul of Tarsus. For him, his religion and upbringing were sufficient ... If only he had paid attention to what the prophet Isaiah had written ... about how all our righteousness are as filthy rags (Is. 64:6).

Salvation is for sinners ... and there are really no differences in the types of sinners for *all* have sinned (Rom. 3:23) There is only one means by which sin in all its various shapes and forms can be removed and that is by believing in Jesus Christ as Saviour, *Acts 4:12 for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*

Saul of Tarsus, are you listening?! No, he was intent on *not* listening ... but little did he know the God he was up against! ... The God Who would pursue him, - despite what he was, - and place within his heart the exceeding riches of His grace in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7).

It was by nothing less than God's grace Saul of Tarsus was eventually saved. Left to his own devices, he *never* would have believed in Christ for he was far too stubborn. ... The fact is, we are *all* too stubborn, and that is why none of us are saved by our own devices. ... We are only saved by grace for grace, - and the ability to receive it by faith, - is the free gift given by God to secure our salvation (Eph. 2:8) ... And it was nothing less than God's free grace which interrupted and saved Saul of Tarsus, the religious sinner ... Saul, who was *breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1)* ... that same Lord Whose message you are working hard to quell ... that same Lord loves you, and has a plan for your life. ... And that is why Jesus met him on the road to Damascus ... so Saul the sinner would trust in Christ to become his

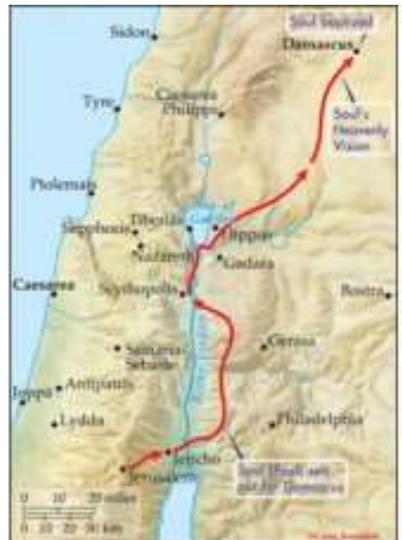
Saviour. ... And that is where we shall take up our study of Saul of Tarsus next Sunday evening. ...

Part II

To describe Saul of Tarsus as a ‘reluctant believer’ would be a massive understatement! He had absolutely *no* intention of becoming a Christian ... *none whatsoever!*

Our present study begins in Jerusalem where he was **Acts 9:1 breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples [i.e. followers] of the Lord ...** But what really annoyed him was the Christians were getting out of control, - he wasn’t making much of an impact on getting rid of them! Despite Stephen being killed, the followers of “The Way” were going from strength to strength ... They dispersed from Jerusalem into Judea, and then up into Samaria, and to Damascus. So, Saul decided he had to rout them out! He went to the high priest and requested the necessary documentation, **2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. ...** He was ‘beyond serious’ about getting rid of these Christians! That was what drove him! He was infatuated with eradicating the new ‘sect’ which had accessed many of the synagogues in Damascus.

Historical records tell us there were about 20,000 Jews in Damascus ... and when some of those Jews became Christians, they remained within the synagogue ... because where else was there for them to go?! Indeed, Christianity in Damascus goes back two thousand years ... to the beginning of the New Testament Church. Damascus, itself, was an ancient city, the capital of Syria, - one of the oldest continuous settlements in the world. So, Saul of Tarsus planned to travel the 130 miles north-east to Damascus ... and the 130 miles back to Jerusalem



with the Christian men and women he intended to imprison and punish.

It would have taken him and his companions about six days. Leaving Jerusalem, they would have gone down to Jericho, crossed the River Jordan and travelled up its eastern side (... so as not to travel through Samaria). He would then have crossed the River Jordan to its western side and along the short distance to the south of the Sea of Galilee ... and crossed the River Jordan again to the eastern side, and headed up north-east to Damascus. ... Just outside Damascus, - about six days after having started his journey from Jerusalem ... he would have been tired, thirsty, and hungry but looking forward to apprehending the Christians ... and then something he had never considered took place which changed his life!

... God took the initiative in Saul's salvation, for God stopped him in his tracks ... and Saul had no idea it would happen, and even if he had, he could not have done anything about it!

Most people do not have an experience like what Saul was about to have, - some people do ... most don't though, - but, nevertheless, God always takes the initiative which leads to our salvation. He may use various means, - maybe through a particular Bible verse, perhaps through a friend, maybe through unexpected circumstances, - but the bare fact is you did not go looking for Him ... He began by looking for you! The way we came to faith in the Lord Jesus differs, but the fact we came is all due to Him.

Looking back on it now, we can see how he did it. As far as Saul was concerned, he was hurtling along the road ... his mind full of what he was going to do with these Christians, [Acts 9:3](#) **And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven ...** The Lord stopped him, "You've gone far enough, and now, - before you go any further, - I am going to deal with you ... and you are going to have to deal with Me!"

Saul had not planned on this happening. It was completely 'out of the blue' ... God put up the barrier and *stopped* this enemy of the Christians. He was walking along ... in the middle of the day (Acts 26:13), ... and a light brighter than the sun shone ... and he and all the men with him fell to the ground (v.4; Acts 26:14). After a few moments, the other men got up, but Saul lay there ... and he could not see a thing! He, and the men with him, were speechless. Saul heard a voice speaking, but no one could be seen ... As far as the men were concerned, they heard a noise but didn't know what it was. ... It was pandemonium!

And as Saul lay there ... he saw the Lord Jesus in all His glory. This was no mirage or hallucination, - the **s-u-n** hadn't got to him ... but the **S-o-n had!** ... He, - Saul, - had heard about how his friends in the Sanhedrin had found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and had condemned Him to be crucified, so Saul knew Jesus had been put to death ... But here on the road to Damascus, - just outside the city, - the risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him. ... Jesus wasn't dead, - he was alive ... and this is what he referred to in I Cor. 15:8, *And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.*

But, why did the Lord leave it so long before he stopped Saul? Why didn't the Lord confront Saul outside Jerusalem, shortly after he had started his journey? Why did the Lord leave it so long? ... I'm sure there could be a number of possible answers but the simplest is this ... God often allows us to almost exhaust ourselves in our struggles to keep Him out. Saul was running here, there, and yonder trying to obstruct the Gospel ... and God let him *until* He said, No more, I'm going to stop you, and you *will* believe! ... You, Saul, will be faced with such incontrovertible evidence that your only choice will be to believe!

Actually, before all this, someone had prayed for Saul ... and Saul would have heard that someone pray. Turn back to Acts 7, **58** *And cast him [Stephen] out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. 59* *And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60* *And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. ... Stephen had prayed for Saul and his companions, and now the Lord was answering that prayer. Remember what Jesus taught, Mt. 5:11* *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake ... 44* *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. ... Stephen's prayer was being answered, as the Lord confronted Saul on the road to Damascus!*

And after the contact comes the conviction and the confrontation for the Lord challenges him. He is lying on the ground (v.4) trembling (v.6), and he hears the emphasis in the Saviour's voice when his name was spoken twice, "Saul, Saul" ... The Lord has brought this proud man *down* onto the ground! He is not powerful anymore. He had the letter from the high priest somewhere in his pocket, but he is not a 'big man' anymore ... for the Lord has brought him down! ... He has the dust of the road on his face, he cannot see, ... and he's petrified! ... Notice too it wasn't simply a single "Saul" he heard, but it was an emphatic

“Saul, Saul” ... and there was no ignoring it! ... He *had* to listen! ... This was for Him ... The other men heard a ‘noise’, but Saul heard *the voice* of the Saviour speaking to him!

He was in a horrible job, - it wouldn’t have taken much courage to do what he was doing in the name of religion ... He not only persecuted men, but he also persecuted women. That, in turn, had an impact upon their children and upon the older members of the family ... Families were devastated because of what this man, - Saul of Tarsus, - was doing ... If he had only the *remotest* inkling of decency, he is *bound* to have had a battle going on inside him because of the evil things he was plotting and planning ... and maybe that was a reason why he was so determined! And then when he heard Stephen praying for him, that would have ‘knocked him over the edge’, as we say, - it would have made him worse ... I *will* get rid of these Christians!

... He has been fighting against everything, and not least, against God ... and now God is confronting him, ⁴ *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?* ... And there is Jesus identifying with His followers who Saul is persecuting, ^{Mt. 25:41} *Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: 43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. 44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? 45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. 46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

... For every cruel activity Saul was taking against a child of God, he was taking it against the Lord Jesus. ... And look again at the way Jesus questioned him, *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?* ... Why do you hate Me? You have never met Me and spoken to Me ... You don’t know Me ... Why is your life full of with such hatred of Me? ... That is the crux of the matter, - that is why people end up in Hell. It is not simply for all the bad things they have done ... because the Lord saves murderers and rapists and people who have done terrible things ... but when they come to Him and ask Him for forgiveness, He will give that forgiveness freely ... But the person He does *not* save is the one who does *not* come to Him, and ask.

Saul *does* come to him, though, for he answers, ⁵ *And he said, Who art thou, Lord?* ... None of the other men uttered a word! ... This was a very *definite* and

particular conversation between Saul and the Saviour ... There was only one conversation ... between Christ and Saul! ... It is like the time when Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, in the graveyard ... and if He had only said, “Come forth” ... every grave and every tomb would have emptied ... but Jesus spoke to one in particular, **Jn. 11:43** *And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.* **44** *And he that was dead came forth* ... Lazarus arose because he was called Him by name. ... In the same way, Saul was called by name ... none of the rest of the men, - at that time, anyway, - ... for it was to Saul Jesus particularly came.

... *And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest* ... And notice Saul didn't argue for he knew what Jesus meant, - he knew he couldn't deny it for he had persecuted the Lord's people ... and to persecute the Lord's people is the same as persecuting the Lord! ... And Saul knew that!

No wonder he was **6** *trembling and astonished* [*θαμβέω, terrified*]! ... And the Lord followed it up by telling him the obvious, *it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks*. ... That is referring to a long stick with desperately sharp nails at one end, and it was used to pierce and prod the stubborn oxen to get them to do your bidding. It would not have been a pleasant experience, but the oxen needed such severe treatment, otherwise they would not go where you would want them to go. Similarly, the Lord Jesus had to contend with Saul in such a heavy manner for he was stubbornly rebelling against God. ... Kick against God, and you get hurt! ... *He* doesn't suffer, but *you* do! ... Saul was fighting against the Gospel. He was refusing to accept it. He couldn't get to God, but he got to God's people, and God was saying, “Enough!” ... Saul was the one who was being hurt!

Picture Saul listening to Stephen. Watch him as Stephen quoted from the Old Testament, and explained Christ from the writings Saul knew so well. ... Saul had never thought of it like that, but he daren't think about it in case it interfered with what he believed, as a strict Jew. ... But, what he heard from Stephen would not go away ... and it had been troubling him. He could not escape what he had heard ... He was very probably so strong against the Christian faith because of what he heard had been taking a hold of him, and he did not want that to happen! ... So, to shut it out, he became more and more fanatical!

Indeed, many people try to resist the Gospel. They try to ignore it, they try to shut it out of their minds, they turn vehemently against it, - “I will not believe!” ... But, the hold it gets to take on them comes from God, and they are powerless to resist and reject. ... That is the predicament Saul was in! ... He

could not escape it, and somewhere, - possibly between v.5 and v.6, - the light of the Gospel of saving grace entered his soul and he was saved, for ⁶ *he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?* ... That is a question which only could be asked by a believer! ... Lord, I surrender, I give up. I can't argue with You anymore ... Lord, I recognise who You are, - the risen victorious Jesus, - and I confess I am not worthy, but Lord, I hand my life over to you ... *what wilt thou have me to do?*

He had travelled all the way from Jerusalem, - over 130 miles, in about six days ... walking more than twenty miles a day ... plenty of 'thinking time' – but it wasn't the thinking that took him to the Saviour, it was when the Saviour brought him to his knees! ... Thinking, alone, will never convince anyone to be saved because it only happens when the Saviour intervenes ... And it eventually dawned on Saul how terribly wrong he was, and he 'gave in' to the will of God and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Master. ... God entered Saul's life! ... The Saviour answered him, ⁵ *I am Jesus*, - that is the name at which every knee shall bow ... and Saul was made to bow in the dust of that busy road to Damascus.

And when the Lord answered and said to him, ⁶ *Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do ... there is relief.* He's blind and exhausted, but there is relief too. The fighting is over between Jesus and Saul. ... The fighting and opposition is about to start with men who previously he worked alongside, *Acts 9:23* *And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him*, ... but as far as him and God were concerned, the fighting was over for he was now on the Lord's side.

And the Christians in Damascus had nothing to fear from him anymore for the threat from him was finished ... It was over. In fact, when he *did* arrive in Damascus, he went to the synagogues ... and instead of *persecuting*, *he preached* Christ (v.20), and then he made his way back to Jerusalem and he preached Christ there too (v.29) ... and the churches had rest (v.31). ... He had turned from being a *persecutor* to a *preacher*!

The Lord had changed him from the inside out, and that is what salvation does because the proof is shown in how your whole life changes. Jesus becomes your priority, and you want to do that which pleases Him.

In fact, contact – conviction – confrontation – challenge – conversion – *consecration*, for his role in life has taken such a tremendous 'U-turn', ⁶ *Lord*, ... he acknowledged the Lordship of Christ ... *what wilt thou have me to do?* ...

Jesus, I'm Yours now. ... He left Jerusalem denying the Lordship of Christ, and when He returned, he was preaching it! ... Jesus, You came and met me, and You saved me ... You shed Your blood for me on Calvary and I'm no longer my own for You have purchased me for Yourself. ... Jesus, I'm Yours now.

That is what it means to be a Christian, - you belong to Jesus. Anything less will never work ... It will be false and empty and will not last. ... Being a Christian means Christ comes in, and when He comes into your life He becomes your Lord and Master. He liberates/frees you up to become what you were created to be ... and it is the most natural question to ask Him, *what wilt thou have me to do?* ... and this same man got it 100% right for he wrote later, **Phil. 1:21** *For to me to live is Christ.* He gave everything to the Saviour on the road to Damascus, - not a piece now, and a piece later ... he gave everything there and then. And Saul received Him as both, - Saviour and Lord, because that is the only way which truly defines Godly obedience, ... *what wilt thou have me to do?*

... And Saul listened to the Lord tell him he had to go on ahead into Damascus, but this time, with a completely different agenda, **6** *And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.*

And he didn't even have to ask the Lord how he was going to get there ... He was blind (v.8), but that did not hinder him. He got himself up off the ground (v.8) ... and the men who came with him stood there speechless, - not knowing what had happened ... It was all a complete blur to them, **7** *And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice [φωνή, a sound, a noise], but seeing no man.* God was even going to use them, for they took Saul by the hand and led him into Damascus (v.8), ... and he was completely blind for the next three days, *and neither did eat nor drink* (v.9).

That was God's grace in action. Here was a man who had started out on a journey, convinced he knew where he was going and what he was going to do when he got there ... but along the way, the Lord miraculously changed his life had been changed forever. And instead of rushing on ahead, the Lord kept him in Damascus for the next three days to get everything into perspective.

When the Lord saves you, it takes a while to come to terms with what has happened, and you need to realise Who you now belong to. ... For those three days, nothing else would have been on Saul's mind except his meeting with Christ, and the commitment he made ... and that is all he would have thought

of ... How good, though, it was for him to have had those three days ... even in his blindness, for he kept looking upon the Saviour.

... In our study, we have mentioned Saul's first contact with the Saviour, then conviction, confrontation, challenge, conversion, consecration ... and now, *communion* for the Lord has achieved His purpose in bringing Saul so far along that Damascus road. ... The former persecutor is now in fellowship with the Lord. ... And really, he is only starting for the Lord has many good things yet ahead for him ... as indeed, He has for each one of His born-again children.

Part III

During those three days when Saul of Tarsus was without sight ... and he neither ate nor drank, and I don't suppose he did much sleeping either, ... it would have been like nothing he had experienced before. He was used to being busy, and travelling all over the country, but the Lord made him stop to take account of the new life ahead of him. ... From the beginning, he needed to take time, - just him and God, - to come to terms with what was before him.

Approaching the end of those three days, the Lord contacted a man called Ananias and instructed him to go to the home in Damascus where Saul was staying. ... Ananias was about to experience a miracle of grace, for he was to meet the man many of his Christian brothers and sisters considered one of the most dangerous threats to their Christian faith. This man, Saul of Tarsus, was so *committed* in his opposition to Christianity that many in the churches weren't even praying for him for they didn't think he could be saved ... and Ananias hints at that, **13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem**

Nevertheless, Ananias was about to experience a miracle of God's grace for he would meet a truly transformed man. Here is a former Christ-hater and dedicated persecutor of the Christians, and his whole world had been turned upside down. His old ways had gone, and he was a new man in the Lord Jesus. As he himself was later to write to the church in Corinth, **I Cor. 15:10 by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain.**

... Nothing less than the grace of God saved and changed Saul of Tarsus. That is what happens, though, when a person becomes a Christian. There is a change

takes place, and others can see it. It happens because, - spiritually-speaking, - God takes you out of the darkness and into His light, - as Peter wrote, **1 Peter 2:9** that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. ... When the Lord Jesus becomes your Saviour you don't stop being a human being, - you don't become some ridiculous religious eccentric or fanatic - ... but you become complete, and at peace with yourself and with God. Saul was no longer contending with God (cf. v.5) for he had been brought to the place of submission to God. Yes, to put it crudely, God had won for He always wins. ... As we see here, there is no point fighting Him for He never loses. God does not know defeat!

And He worked on Saul of Tarsus until a calm assurance overwhelmed him. ... *Physically*, he was in the darkness during those three days because he had lost his sight, but, at the same time, *spiritually*, a new light was dawning in his soul. ... And the Lord took him aside to prepare him, in the quiet place ... uninterrupted ... just Saul and his Saviour.

... And that is how God prepares the Christian, through His Word. To develop as a Christian, you have to read and study His Word so you put it into practice. Through it, He gives us His pattern to live by ... What would *God* have me do? How would *God* have me proceed? He is my priority and I need to find out what is His will for my life ... And those are the kind of thoughts Saul of Tarsus would have been contemplating during those three days. ... What does God want me to do with my new direction in life? Where does He have for me to go? I am no longer my own, for I am His now, - I'm His possession.

Look again, deep into the soul of this blind man Saul ... His world had changed. His former career had collapsed, and the One He previously despised was now the One he was serving. ... And none was as surprised as him! ... One week earlier, - if someone had said to him, - you're going to meet Jesus and you are going to become a Christian ... If someone had said that to Saul, he would have arrested them for contempt and thrown them in jail. It would have been ridiculous and unbelievable ... and yet, it is what happened! The Lord saved him, and Saul was given those three days to contemplate and come to terms with it!

Where had the change come from? ... It had not come from the outside, because Saul definitely did not envy the example of any Christian. Instead, the change came from within ... Saul's transformation was nothing to do with what he had done, but everything to do with what the Lord was doing in his heart.

The place where the change had to happen was somewhere Saul could not get to, - it was somewhere beyond his capability to reach ... *deep inside*. A man or a woman can change many of their circumstances, - they can improve their job prospects ... adopt a healthier lifestyle ... but they cannot effectuate any lasting change for good in the heart.

They might be able to do something which would last for a while, but would revert to how it was. They would set themselves the task of ‘turning over a new leaf’, only to find themselves going back. ... They try to change their circumstances on the outside, but they cannot change the inside ... and that is where the Bible says the change has to take place. It explains, **Jer. 17:9** *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*, ... And yet, the Lord promises, **Ezek. 36:26** *A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.* ²⁷ *And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.* ... I will give you a new heart and a new spirit to follow after Me ... and that is what the Lord instilled within Saul of Tarsus.

Before he came to that point on the Damascus road, his heart was as hard as hard could be against the Lord Jesus and the Gospel. To say He hated it is an understatement! He travelled the length and breadth of the country in pursuit of Christians. They feared his name. He jailed them. He persecuted, and he killed them. But when Jesus Christ met him on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus became a new man. God removed from him the old ‘stony, vicious, depraved heart’, - full of hatred, - and put a new God-glorifying heart in its place ... and a completely new and different spirit to go along with it.

Saul became a new creation to serve his new Master! ... That is what a Christian wants to do, - serve Christ, - for that is what He saves them to do. ... And this change in Saul’s life came about when he met Jesus. ... *Jesus* changed him! ... That was how he wrote to Timothy, **1 Tim. 1:12** *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry;* ¹³ *Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious [ὕβριστής, arrogant, nasty, obnoxious, arrogant]: but I obtained [received] mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.* ¹⁴ *And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant [overflowed] with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.* ... That is how I was and am saved, he wrote, for through the grace of God He generously and inexhaustibly granted me the faith and love to believe in His Son. ... I didn’t change *me*, but *Christ* changed me!

And the first thing he did, - when he arrived in Damascus, - was to leave the company of the men who, - like himself, when he started out from Jerusalem, - despised the Name of Christ. He could not stay with them a moment longer than he had to for they were now facing opposite directions. Their duties and their priorities were irreconcilable. He had to part from the old ways, and he spoke from experience when he was later to challenge the believers in Corinth, **II Cor. 6:14** *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? ... 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you ...* When Saul arrived in Damascus, he was taken from them because he could not be with them and be with the Christians at the same time, - he couldn't have 'a foot in both camps'. Neither side, - his former Jewish companions, or the Christians, - would have allowed it ... Either he remained with and kept his old lifestyle or he left it and followed Christ! It had to be one or the other.

And do you see why the Lord left it until Saul was almost within Damascus, - **Acts 9:3** *And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus, - ... he didn't have too long to stay with them until the Lord brought him into another place, to the home of Judas in the street called Straight. ... The Lord had it all worked out! ... And He had it worked out too that He would get the men Saul was with to bring him to the place where Ananias would find him. ... God uses the unsaved to do His bidding. He used them to bring Saul to the place where he needed to be at that time. ... He even brought him to the home of a man who shared the same name as the one who betrayed the Saviour! ... God turned it all upside-down ... His thoughts don't always coincide with ours, and neither are His ways always our ways (Is. 55:8) ... but His ways are always guaranteed to be the best.*

... And for those three days he was shut away in the house of a man who shared his name with the betrayer of Jesus. It's unfortunate how the name 'Judas' has turned out to be a by-word for a traitor, because here was a man who was anything but for he allowed this new believer to live in his house for those three days, - *this* Judas was not ashamed to be a Christian! ... And Saul was not imprisoned or held against his will, but he was shut away in a place to be alone with God. ... Nothing else! There were no interferences! God kept everyone away from him for those three days so he would focus upon what was happening in his life.

He would have been reliving the Damascus road experience, over and over again. He would have been remembering details each time he considered it. He would have been contemplating how before he became blind, the last sight he saw was the glory of Jesus ... Jesus, the Man whose followers he was cruelly persecuting ... and yet, Jesus was all he thought about for those three days. He relived how Jesus had appeared to him ... and how Jesus had spoken to him. During those three days, he relived how he fell on his knees in the dust of the Damascus road, and how he had answered the Saviour, **Acts 9:5** *Who art thou, Lord?* ... **6** *Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?* ... What did *this* mean, and what did *that* mean? ... That was the kind of man Saul of Tarsus was.

He didn't have a *blind* faith, but he wanted to *know* exactly to Whom he now belonged. ... The miracle of free and sovereign and saving grace ... The Lord came and met *me* ... **1 Tim. 1:15** *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.* ... He came to save *me*! ... For God so loved *me* that He sent His only-begotten Son into this world for *me*, to die for *me* on Calvary that He would take *my* sins away from *me* forever ... and I will never have to suffer the punishment for *my* sins that were due to *me* because my Saviour *Jesus* paid the full price of God's wrath that was rightly *mine*. ... That is what Jesus has done for me, in taking away from me my sins ... During those three days of blindness, Saul 'saw' more than he had ever seen before!

What changes has the Lord made in your life since you became a Christian? There *has* to be changes because in Christ, you become a new creation ... and that means the old things which would be a hindrance to your new faith must pass away, and you become a new person (II Cor. 5:17). It means becoming a Christian affects the way you think, speak, and behave ... and that is how it changed Saul of Tarsus. He didn't want to be with the old company he used to keep for they hated Jesus ... and if he stayed with them, he could not advance in his new faith. In fact, if he *would* have stayed in their company, he would have lasted no time because in becoming a Christian, he became their enemy, **Acts 9:23** *And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him* ... Therefore, he had a decision to make and he decided he no longer wanted to go to those places which would offend His Saviour. He stayed away from anywhere which might be a threat to His faith in Christ. ... His faith in Christ was the most important aspect of his life.

There is only one way to be a Christian ... and that is to have Jesus Christ as your priority, - He must come first, **Phil. 1:21** *For to me to live is Christ.*

Some day we shall have to leave this earth, and stand before our Saviour to give an account of ourselves. Whatever paths He sets before us to trod is always for our good in the Christian faith, - those paths are put in place to make us more like Jesus, so therefore, it is our responsibility to live in a way which is pleasing to Him so that we shall hear Him say, *Mt. 25:21* Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful.

... That is how the Lord was dealing with Saul during those three days, and Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the apostle could honestly look back and say, *Acts 26:19* I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision ... When the Lord met me, I became His. He made the claim on my life, and I belong to Him. He saved me for a purpose ... to serve Him, and that is what I have been doing to the best of my ability ever since. Being a Christian has changed my life ... Putting Jesus first is my priority ... and when the Lord saw how Saul was responding, He entered upon the next stage, when He sent Ananias to speak to him further.

The Lord does not give us any more than we can contend with. He does not 'swamp' us to the point where we feel totally incapable. Instead, He opens up the doors at the right times for when He has prepared us to pass through them. ... That is what He was doing with Saul, - He firstly met him on the road outside Damascus, and then He had him brought into the home provided by Judas. The next part of God's plan for Saul's development in the Christian life was when He introduced Ananias. ... God would never have His children standing still spiritually-speaking, - there has to be a progression, ... each of us needs to grow and mature. ... I trust we are keeping up with Him in the strength He gives us to do His will. Amen.

Part IV

However, Saul of Tarsus wasn't the only man God was dealing with in Damascus, *Acts 9:10* And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. ... Ananias was one of those devout Jews in the city, and by virtue of the Lord involving him in this way, it is evident he had come to saving faith in Jesus Christ (*Acts 22:12*), - he had become a Christian. He would have been one of those people at the top of Saul's 'hitlist' to persecute and imprison, for there is every likelihood he was a stalwart of the church in Damascus ... However, the Lord changed the circumstances for instead of Saul 'catching up' with Ananias, Ananias was sent by God to 'catch up' with Saul!

The Lord can never be surprised. He is always in control, and so He introduced Ananias ... What else do we know about Ananias? Very little, except the Lord had him as His man in that place for that time. He does not have a high profile in Scripture. We don't hear about him outside of these circumstances (cf. Acts 22:12 ... the Ananias in Acts 5 is a completely different man) ... and yet this Ananias, - who only appears once, and then disappears, - was the man God used to introduce Saul of Tarsus into the Christian church.

But when you think about it ... there were also others in Scripture, - like Ananias, - who did not have a high profile and they played a very significant role in God's plan ... For example, who was the young slave-girl who gave the news which brought Naaman the leper to Elisha, and was healed? ... She is only mentioned once in Scripture, and we are not told her name. ... Who was the man stuttering his way through a Bible verse when Spurgeon was saved in the Primitive Methodist chapel? ... God uses ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things. ... When you are faithful to the Lord, you ought never underestimate what He can do through you!

... Ananias was one of those people who don't seem to be important and yet, *he* was for the Lord used him in the early Christian career of Saul of Tarsus who would become the great apostle Paul.

We can develop this a little further ... When you become a Christian, God gives you a responsibility to serve Him, - He gives you a job that only you can do for Him. There may be others doing something similar, but only you have your abilities and gifts. Therefore, we all have our own specific ministries ... and you have a work to do for the Lord that I don't, and similarly, I have responsibilities in the Lord's work you don't. ... And so, God called no one else in the Damascus congregations to meet Saul of Tarsus, only Ananias.

By the way, Ananias was a popular name, - we mentioned that already, in connection with the Ananias who was married to Sapphira (Acts 5). It comes from the Hebrew name, Chananyah, "God has favoured". It is the name of fourteen different men in the Old Testament, and in particular, it was the name of the young friend of Daniel before he was given the Babylonian name "Shadrach", **Dan. 1:6** Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: **7** Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach ...

“God [*had*] favoured” Ananias to bring Saul of Tarsus a special message that he would become the giant of the Christian faith.

Revert behind the scenes again and think for a moment how little Ananias knew about what the Lord was calling him to ... Ananias did not know Saul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, - it would have been intended as a surprise to the Christian churches. He did not know the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem had plotted and planned a wave of persecution for the church in Damascus. He probably did not know Saul, even though he had *heard* of him. He would not have known Saul had been blinded just outside Damascus, or that Saul had become a Christian believer. He himself was very much ‘in the dark’ about this, and recent developments ... Ananias’ hesitance to meet with Saul was perfectly understandable (vv. 13,14)!

Nonetheless, the Lord directly told him to go to a certain street in the city of Damascus, called Straight Street, and specifically to the home of a man called Judas [*‘he shall be praised’*], about whom we know nothing, - Ananias obviously knew him though. ... The street called Straight, however, is well-known in Damascus ... and it’s on the heritage and historic trail in the city. It was formed in Roman times, - known in Latin as *Via Recta*, - and ran through the middle of the city from the eastern gate to the western gate. It was slightly less than a mile long, twenty-eight yards wide, and in Arabic today it as *Al-Shāri` al-Mustaqīm*. There are many historical places of interest along the street, and the house of Judas and the Chapel of Ananias is at its western side. [*see <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/syria/damascus-straight-street-via-recta/>*]

So, Saul has been in this home of Judas for three days, and he has been spending that time praying and learning from the Lord. The Lord Jesus he previously rejected, he is now in conversation with ... and also, Stephen’s prayer for his salvation had been answered ... Paul has ‘come through’, he is now a believer ... and he is speaking with the Lord ... How important is that? ... Well, having contact with the Lord is a sure sign of a Christian! ... Prayer is one of the evidences of true and living faith, - the fact you want to talk to God is the evidence you know Him.

... Imagine someone who says they are a Christian and they don’t pray ... It is like being married and not talking to your spouse! ... It is like the little baby who needs the care of the mother and the father, - it cries with the inbuilt knowledge its cries will be heard and answered ... That is what prayer is, - the two-way conversation between the Christian and God. If we are saved, we

naturally cry to our Heavenly Father for we have been granted the knowledge inside that He is interested in our crying. ... But think of how concerned we would be if a little baby was born and it did not cry! There would be something terribly wrong ... and there would also be something terribly wrong if a Christian did not pray! ... *Saul* would have been earnestly praying to the Lord. This wasn't the first time he prayed for he has been praying all his life ... but this was the first time he got through to the Lord!

One of the things he would have been praying for was help and direction, - he was blind, and friendless. His future was uncertain from an ordinary human level. His world had gone ... What is going to happen to me?!

The answer to his prayers, though, did not come until three days later when Ananias arrived. The Lord would answer in His own time ... which would, - incidentally, - be the best time for the Lord was preparing Ananias, as he was also preparing Saul. ... Prayer takes preparation *on all sides* ... He didn't forget about Saul, and concentrate on Ananias, - each were important to Him ... From our perspective, sometimes we are impatient, why doesn't God answer our prayers *immediately*?! ... Lord, what's keeping You? Why don't You answer rightaway?!

Well, God always answers our prayers at the *best* time, - whether it happens to be immediately or later! ... Paul explained it, **Eph. 2:10** *we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.* ... We are 'a work in progress', and the way God answers our prayers facilitate what He is doing with us. Every dealing He has with us is for our advancement as a Christian. ... If He was to answer our prayers immediately, and in the manner we want Him too, He would be nothing more than like our 'genie' 'popping out of the bottle'. He is not our servant, though, *we are His!* ... And to add to that ... we are God's workmanship, and the word for 'workmanship' is used only twice in the New Testament, - here in Eph. 2:10, and also in **Rom. 1:20** *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.* It is referring to God's people as His 'masterpiece'. A Christian is God's masterpiece as He works to produce in us the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29).

So, here then were two very different men and yet, consider what also they had in common ... They both had a vision, - Saul had a vision and Ananias had a vision ... Both men's experiences began with the Lord. The Lord was working in both their lives. Two very different men from two very places and two very

different circumstances are going to meet in the same place for the first time, - that was how the Lord planned it. And when the Lord met and spoke to Saul, Saul asked, **Acts 9:6** ... **Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?** And when the Lord met and spoke to Ananias, Ananias responded, **10 Behold, I am here, Lord.** ... It shows us that no matter where or what circumstances we come from, - no matter how different we are, - the Lord always works in the same way, in accordance with His grace ... Grace is that gift He plants within us when we become His, which we do not deserve and never can earn through our own efforts. Grace is that which He freely gives to us ... He saved Saul with the same saving grace He saved Ananias. The same amount of the blood of Christ atoned for one man as it did for the other.

When you look at these two, our salvation comes down to this, **Gal. 3:28** **There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.** ... And it doesn't matter who you are or where you have come from ... Jesus is the only Saviour. ... What, Lord, You are telling me to go and meet Saul of Tarsus, who has persecuted my brothers and sisters ... who has travelled all the way from Jerusalem to arrest me and all the Christians here?! **Acts 9:13** **Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: 14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.** ... Yes, the Lord said, that is what I'm telling you! ... Go and meet him!

We also see the grace of God here in His dealings with Ananias for Ananias was coming very close to not wanting to go! The Lord could have chastised him, cast him off, and replaced him for that, but He didn't. Instead, He explained, **15 Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: 16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.** ... The Lord should not have had to explain, - Ananias should have gone obediently ... however, God's grace took the fears and apprehensions of Ananias into account. ... How often He does that! Many another one would consider us not up to the task, but God meets our fears with the gift of His faith so that we are obedient to His call.

How easy it is to say, Lord, send someone else. Or, Ananias could also have said, I'll go tomorrow, or maybe later in the week ... when it might suit me ... when I have worked out in my own mind the best way to proceed. But no, the Lord made it very clear he had to go *immediately*, in the Lord's bidding. ... Some Christians believe the Lord should work to their agenda, - the Lord's plans should fall in behind theirs. But that is not the way it works for He is the Master

and we are the servants. ... Lord, I'll do it tomorrow ... I'll become a more committed Christian, but just at the minute 'I have quite a lot of other priorities on my plate'. ... No, that is not the way it works.

... The Lord does not instruct His people anywhere to become more committed *tomorrow*, - for His work to fit in with our convenience. The fact is, we do not live in 'tomorrow' ... we don't live 'in the future' ... there is no such thing in living in 'tomorrow' for we live *now, today!* And that is why God puts the emphasis on *today*, for example, **Joshua 24:15** choose you *this day* whom ye will serve ... **II Cor. 6:2** behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now is the day* of salvation. ... God does not want your service *tomorrow*, - He wants it *today*. ... One foolish man in the Bible made the mistake of saying to the Lord's servant, **Acts 24:25** Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. ... There is no more convenient time than *now*, - it is the only time you are sure of ... and when God calls you to be a Christian, you must become a Christian before He rescinds His call, or lose it altogether ... And when He calls you, - as a Christian, - to a particular area of service, similarly, the only time you are sure of is *now!*

Ananias, He wants you to serve Him, and He is calling you now. ... Get yourself along to the house in that street, and you tell the man you find there, - Saul of Tarsus, - he is a 'chosen vessel', - that is what God thinks of him. ... You will find the man sitting in darkness, - blind, for he cannot see, - but you tell Him the Lord has a path set out before him to travel, ... tell him, **Prov. 3:5** Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. **6** In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. ... Tell him ... God has chosen him to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, - Whom he previously persecuted, - to the Gentiles, and the kings and rulers and emperors, and to the people of Israel. And also tell him he will be told all he needs to know, and that he will suffer courageously and faithfully for My name.

The Lord was opening a new chapter in the life of the Church and He was giving Ananias the privilege of being part of that chapter, **17** And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house. ... He was obedient ... What would he have been thinking as he walked along the street? I don't think he would have been afraid now for his fears would have been allayed. The Lord does not have to explain to us what He is doing, but He did on this occasion and it meant Ananias could walk along that street knowing he was in the will of God. He wasn't afraid of Saul ... He walked into the house, - Saul would have heard him, but could not have seen him ... In fact, *Saul* might have been the more apprehensive one!

Anyhow, Ananias walked in, put his hands on him, and said, *Brother Saul ... Brother Saul!* ... What a change! ... The man who came all the way from Jerusalem with cruel intent towards the Christians was now a believer ... a brother in the Lord! ... None are too hard for the Lord to save! ... Only God's grace could do such a thing! ... Saul did not find a new religion, but Saul was found by the Saviour! ... Saul and Ananias were now one in Christ, - they were united in the Lord. ... Two very different people, but one in the faith, ¹⁷ *Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.* ¹⁸ *And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.*

... We are not finished yet for we shall have to look at that also ... But Saul, you did not want to have anything to do with Jesus, nonetheless, Jesus has called you in salvation, and being saved, He has called you into His service. ... You are a Christian now Saul, and your purpose is to serve Jesus. He will open up the doors for you to follow Him through ... And it's true, every believer is saved to serve, - our Saviour served, and we are to serve our Saviour. Saul, - said God, - people are going to find out about Me through you ... Isn't that what a Christian is about? ... Other people finding out about Jesus from you and me ... That is our purpose here on earth ... to be recognised as belonging to the Saviour, and to be serving Him through the opportunities He presents before us. Amen

PART V

Paul wrote, **II Cor. 5:17** *if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* ... That is the test which proves the claim. When you become a Christian, you change. Depending upon how you were before, that change may be prominent and noticeable, or it may appear fairly slight. For example, if you were brought up to live by good standards, the change is not as apparent as if you had been saved out of a lifestyle of drink and drugs and everything else.

Now, if you have always lived a good lifestyle, you might wonder if a change really *has* taken place ... are you really saved? Well, yes, if you have asked the Lord to come into your life, He will, and He has. ... It does not mean you are any the less saved than someone who has lived the very opposite ... because of three obvious reasons, - firstly, as far as God was concerned, you were dead in

sin (Eph. 2:1) ... and dead is dead and there are no degrees of how dead you are! Secondly, it took the same measure of the blood of Christ to wash your sins away, as it did for anyone else, - it doesn't matter what you did before, or what they did ... what Christ achieved cost the same for both. Thirdly, the same change is made in every person He saves, - He reaches into the very *heart* of the problem, and that is where He accomplishes His work of salvation ... when grace through saving faith is applied.

And at that moment of the *new* creation, - the moment you become a Christian, - you begin a *new* journey, a new life. As far as God is concerned, He took you off one road and placed you on another. One road took you away from Him, and the new road He put you on will bring you to Him. ... A consequence of that is ... you cannot have a foot on each path, - you have to be on either one or the other, because they end up in different destinations ... travelling *with* God, or travelling *without* God.

When you make that conscious decision to follow the Lord Jesus, it shows in how you display yourself. Everything about you begins to portray you to be a Christian. The unsaved might not put it in the terms we would use, but they recognise there is something *different* about you ... and you know the *difference* is because of your faith in Christ. ... You are living to please Him, and to be a good 'advertisement' for Him.

Ananias has come along to the home of Judas in Straight Street, Damascus, - right in the centre of the city. The Lord has told him to go there to meet a well-known opponent of the Christian Church, - that was the reputation of Saul of Tarsus'. ...

However, Saul of Tarsus has been *saved*, - on the approach to Damascus, Jesus Christ met and changed his life. ... As a consequence, he was finished with persecuting Christians, for he was now a Christian himself! ... He was a brand new believer who had been sitting in the darkness, in this house, - he had been blinded, - for those three days since his meeting with the Saviour ... and during those three days he was learning about Him, as taught by the Holy Spirit. ... Of course, he had previously believed this Jesus was a liar, a pretender, a deceiver ... but when he met the Lord on the road to Damascus, all he had previously believed was forsaken. Jesus made such a tremendous difference in his life!

The first thing to go was his sin, - when he trusted in Christ as his Saviour, his sin was removed. His sin was not murder, or adultery, or any such thing ... His

overarching sin was his rejection of Jesus as the promised Son of God, the Saviour of His people. ... *That is the greatest sin ... All sin is repugnant to God, but specifically, all sin comes as a result of rejecting Jesus Christ ... which is the greatest of sins.*

But when Saul was brought to the point on the Damascus road where he was constrained to accept Jesus, he willingly believed and that was the start of his new journey with Jesus.

The second thing to go was his blindness, **18** *And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith.* That is not to say when a blind person becomes a Christian they will be given sight. ... These were special circumstances to Saul of Tarsus, but when he was given *back* his sight, his restrictions were gone for he *arose*, he got up. For three days he was in the one place, but after the three days he got up and went out.

How do we know he went out? Well, we know because of the third thing he did which was very important, for he *was baptized*. When Saul of Tarsus was a baby he was taken along to the synagogue to be circumcised, - that is the practice for every Jewish boy, according to the law of Moses. However, when he was *born again* he was *baptised*.

Baptism is not the same as circumcision, and baptism is not the Christian equivalent of the Jewish circumcision ... but baptism is for believers, - those whom the Lord has saved. It is a practice only for Christians who know Jesus Christ as their Saviour. There is no other kind of *Biblical* baptism, - it is only for those who are saved and who obey the Word of God to make a public profession of their faith, and the prescribed Biblical way to do that is through baptism.

Baptism is nothing to do with the parents, or the denomination you were brought in, or anything else ... Biblical baptism is when a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, professes their saving faith before others. It is saying, I belong to Jesus!

Should every Christian be baptised as a believer? Yes, for that is what the Bible teaches ... And baptism is important, - it is not an unnecessary added extra ... it is not something you can take or leave. In fact, here is how important it is ... It was one of the last things Jesus told His disciples to do, **Mt. 28:19** *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.* ... He Himself was baptized in the River Jordan, so to be baptized

is to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. ... He went down into the river, went under the water, and came up out again. ... What does it mean? ... Let Paul explain, **Rom. 6:3** Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: ⁶ Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

In baptism, you are making a statement of identification with Jesus, - when your friends and family see you being baptized, they witness that you belong to Jesus. ... And when you go down into the water, it is like putting to death the way you lived before you became a Christian, - it is a public affirmation that your life has changed. You go down into the water ... and it is like taking your old life with you, and leaving it there *buried*. The water is like a grave. And then, when you come up out of the water, you are illustrating how you have the new life in Jesus Christ. ... He died, was buried, and rose again ... and you, - through the symbolism of baptism, - testify to how your old life before you knew Christ has 'died' and been 'buried' ... and you are coming up out of the water witnessing your new life in Him.

That is what baptism is. It goes away back to Jesus in the River Jordan, and it is the privilege of every Christian, every born-again believer. It also goes away back to the early New Testament believers ... Every soul saved on the Day of Pentecost, - over three thousand, - was baptized, **Acts 2:41** Then they that gladly received his word were baptized ... The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized (Acts 8:38), Lydia was baptized (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailor was baptized (Acts 16:33) ... And to be baptized is to follow the example of Jesus ... in obedience to the Word of God.

Baptism does not save you though. It has nothing magical about it, - it is simply a declaration of your faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation comes only through believing in Him, but baptism is your open and public statement that you *have* believed in Him. ... And the time for baptism is not when you are a little baby, for the whole purpose of baptism is to declare you have personally believed in Christ ... and since a little baby has not yet reached that stage, - it is something they are not capable of. ... Baptism is for believers, those whose sins have been forgiven, and who are following the Lord Jesus.

How did Saul become baptised? Well, he arose Acts 9:18), - he got up, - and he went to where he would find Christians, - that is another sign of being a Christian ... you want to be in the company of other Christians. That is the way you grow as a believer, - being with other believers ... And Saul was brought by these Christians, very probably to a river, - perhaps the main river of Damascus, known as the River Barada ... or maybe one of its tributaries ... and he was publicly baptized. He, - this former Christ-rejector, - openly testified that he was now a Christian, and his old life was over.

And when all that was done, - and this shows us Saul's priority, - Acts 9:19 **And when he had received meat, he was strengthened.** ... Such was intensity of those three days without his sight, he hadn't eaten or slept, and he was hungry! ... And not only was he hungry, but his whole world had changed. He was thinking ways he never would have considered before. Becoming a Christian threw his life in turmoil. All the 'normal' things he had previously done, he could not do anymore ... so, no wonder, - with all these thoughts and many more going round in his head, - ... no wonder he was weak and needed to be strengthened ... In fact, later in his ministry he shows what conclusion he had arrived at, Phil. 4:13 **I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.** ... That's another lovely thought ... When Saul was introduced to them and baptised, they had a fellowship meal ... How important Christian fellowship is! It did Saul good for it showed him the people of God had accepted him.

So, Ananias came to him, Saul's sight was restored, he was baptised, he 'took' a good meal ... Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. ... He did not take his time 'dithering' about wondering what he should do next for he was serious about his new faith, - even more serious than he had been previously about his old life! ... And he searched out the very people he had travelled to Damascus to persecute ... but, instead, by the grace of God, he had become one of them! He entered a new fellowship, and he wasn't afraid to stand and be counted as one of them, and give notice to the world he had become a Christian.

And he could not keep the message to himself, ²⁰ **And straightway [immediately] he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.** ... During those three days sitting blind in the home of Judas, Saul was going over all he had heard about Jesus, and what he had experienced when Stephen was dying, and how, - in Stephen's final moments on earth, - Stephen had prayed for him, Acts 7:60 **Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.** ... A dying man's prayer was answered ... the Lord met Saul, and he was saved! ... Saul, - and when he became known as Paul, -

often gave his testimony. His purpose in life now was to preach Christ, and nothing else ... He preached that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, the Messiah, the promised Son of David ... to the people he had the greatest burden for, that is, his own Jewish people.

... About Saul hearing Stephen's prayer ... There is a beautiful thought ... We all have unsaved loved ones, and we would desperately love to see them saved before the Lord calls us home. But, even if He calls us home, He can *still*, - after we are gone, - go on to save them ... as the Lord did with Saul ... So you never stop praying for them, not until your final breath.

Yes, the church members in Damascus were absolutely amazed, and to a certain degree, bewildered, **Acts 9:21** and said; **Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?** ... Was this a deceptive ploy to trick the Christians? Was Saul only pretending, to find out more about them, and then wreak havoc (cf. **Acts 8:3** **As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.**)

There is also a lesson to those of us who can be hesitant in believing the Lord can save the hardest people. ... We sometimes pray for souls to be saved, but not really expecting our prayers to be answered. ... But the dying Stephen prayed for all those men who were at his stoning, and at least one of them was saved ... Saul of Tarsus. Maybe more were saved afterwards ... God answers our prayers, and we ought not to be surprised, as the church members in Damascus were.

From then on, **22** **Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.** ... Saul went to his own people first, - the Lord directed him into the synagogues, to the Jews. The equivalent there is how the Lord expects us to start among our own, - in our families, and among those with whom we are familiar ... And that is where Saul started. ... But did you notice the 'but' at the beginning of v.22, **But Saul increased the more in strength** ... It was a total surprise to all! His new faith in his Saviour.

It did not begin easy for him ... The Christians in Damascus were understandably suspicious ... Gradually, they did come to trust him ... and then, - when the news spread among his previous associates, he had to contend with *them*, and the hard-hitting Jewish authorities! ... **23** **And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:** **24** **But their laying await was known of Saul.**

And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. ... Now, *he* was getting done to *him* what *he* had previously done to *others*!

When you become a Christian, you open yourself up to opposition and hostility. You can become the brunt of jokes and unpleasant remarks. That is what they did to Jesus though. Some called Him “the son of the devil/Beelzebub” ... And here is Saul, and he has become a target, - they were going to kill him! ... Now, no matter how much people make fun of us, they have not tried to kill us! ... And it did not hinder Saul from serving the Lord ... even though the devil had plans to ‘do away with him’. More importantly, *God* had His plans to use Saul, and God’s plans triumphed. The enemy was watching all the gates out of Damascus, but, - in the will of the Lord, - **25** Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket. ... Where did he go next? ... **26** And when Saul was come to Jerusalem ... Yes, but he went somewhere else *before* he went to Jerusalem, **Gal. 1:17** Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. **18** Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

So, before he went to Jerusalem, he travelled out into the desert, - that’s what Jesus did at the beginning of His ministry, and it is what Saul of Tarsus did too. He went there, - into the quiet place, - to be taught by the Lord. Then he returned to Damascus, spent time with the believers there ... and then he made the *long* journey down to meet the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem. ... *That* would have been an experience ... going back to Jerusalem to meet the Christians, whom he had formerly tried to quash ... and he was also going ‘into the lion’s den’ of his previous associates!

When he arrived in Jerusalem, **26** he assayed [*tried and tried and tried*] to join himself to the disciples: but they were [*imperfect continuous tense*] all afraid of him, and believed [*imperfect continuous tense*] not that he was a disciple. ... They didn’t believe him! He had trouble convincing them!

... What a dilemma he was in! The Jews were out to kill him, and the Christians didn’t want to know him! ... They didn’t believe him! ... And then, - as it were, - ‘out of the blue’, Barnabas, - one of the highly-respected men in the church, - took Saul, **27** ... and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. **28** And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem. ... The recommendation of another brother who had heard of Saul’s faithfulness to the Lord in Damascus. ... **29** And he spake boldly in the name

of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.
30 Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

... What an impression he made! ... I think he was almost 'too much', - *too* keen, - for the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, and that is why *they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus*. ... Everywhere he went, he brought controversy and trouble! ... And he was only in Jerusalem for fifteen days! (**Gal. 1:18** Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.) Indeed, that is how it would be throughout his ministry, - when Paul arrived in a certain place, everybody knew it ... and as many wanted rid of him, as wanted him!

But it is so good how he used his energy for the Lord. Previously, he had used his energy against the Lord and the Lord's people, whereas now he is using it for them! ... Nonetheless, it was too much, so the brethren took him down to the seaside port of Caesarea, put him on a boat, and made sure it set sail for Tarsus. ... *What a man!* ... And I do genuinely think that is how many of the church felt because the next verse seems to imply that, **31** Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied. ... In the nicest possible way, they were glad to get a rest from him for he was too much! He was 'bubbling over' with energy for the Gospel ... so they packed him off ... but when he landed, he preached and preached, and established churches all over the regions, **Acts 15:23** And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, - those were churches started by Saul/Paul!

But those were great times in the churches **Acts 9:31** Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria for first they were 'edified', and then they were 'multiplied'. ... Spiritual growth, and then numerical growth ...

Yes, what a man he was! We smile as we read what Peter thought of him, **II Peter 3:15** And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; **16** As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood ... He was a great servant of God, but look where God took him from ... Look what he was, and then what the Lord made out of him.

When and why did his name change to Paul? Well, the custom of dual names was common in those days, - e.g. Abram/Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Simon/Peter. Saul (“desired”) was his Jewish name, and Paul (“small” or “little”) was his Gentile name ... There is no great significance in the name-change, and that is how it is presented in when it happened, **Acts 13:1** Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. **2** As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. **3** And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. **4** So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. **5** And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister. **6** And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus: **7** Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. **8** But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith. **9** Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him ... and it continued on from there.

The story of this man is not about his name-change, but it is about how the Lord changed his heart ... for his old heart, - all his former aspirations and manner of living, - was taken out and replaced with a new heart ... one which had Christ on the throne. And that is what a Christian is, - one whose life is governed and led by the Saviour. ... It is not what Saul/Paul did that was great, but it was what the Lord did through him ... and that is what we have to aim for too ... that is, what the Lord can do through us today. Amen.