

BELOVED ENEMY

by Ray C. Stedman

In the great outline which our Lord Jesus gave of the progress of the gospel throughout the course of this age, he said it would move in three stages:

- First to Jerusalem,
- Then to Judea and all Samaria, and
- Then to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Now, in Acts 9, we are viewing that second stage wherein the gospel is going out to Judea and all Samaria. During that period of time the gospel was being systematically preached throughout every village of Samaria and Judea by outstanding leaders such as Philip and other Christians, and certain of the apostles, as Peter and John. But the Lord was also doing something else. He was preparing the instrument by which the gospel would move into the third stage, the stage in which we today are still involved, that of going to the uttermost parts of the earth. Thus, in Chapter 9, we come to the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

Young Saul of Tarsus, the enemy, the persecutor, the relentless pursuer of Christians, is now to be arrested by Jesus Christ, and conscripted to bear the gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth. There is a well-known poem by Francis S. Thompson, called *The Hound of Heaven*, which traces this ability of Jesus to pursue a man like a relentless hound, following every step. No story has more beautifully manifested that relentless pursuit than the story of Saul of Tarsus. Many of us have experienced something of this as well. It is characteristic of God that he pursues a man or woman until he finds him or her, and converts him to his own purpose.

Here in the opening words of this chapter we find a man pursued.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.
{Acts 9:1-2 RSV}

There are three things of interest to note here:

First, Saul was breathing threats and murder. In the King James Version it says he was "breathing out threats and slaughter." The literal Greek says he was "breathing in threats and murder," i.e., this was the very atmosphere which he breathed. He lived in this climate. He was dedicated in terrible bloody zeal to eliminating what he regarded as the cult of the Nazarene. He was breathing in an atmosphere of hate, violence and murder against it. Later on in this same book, in his appearance before King Agrippa, he himself tells the king how he felt at this time.

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."
{Acts 26:9-11 RSV}

That is Paul's own description of how he felt at the time. Obviously he is a man prompted by a guilty zeal. He has never forgotten the death of Stephen. It continually bothers him, and disturbs his conscience. To quiet it, he engages in this terrible pursuit of the church.

There is a name given to the Christians here that is most interesting. Later on, in the city of Antioch, they will

be called for the first time, *Christians*. But here they are referred to as "those belonging to *the Way*." Names like this are invariably given by opponents, by enemies. A group may form and call themselves by a certain name, but the name that sticks is usually the one that others call them. Here these early Christians were called "those belonging to the Way." That indicated what others saw in these early Christians. They saw that they were different; they had a different way of life. To use the phrase that is rampant today yet is very descriptive of this word, they had a *lifestyle* about them that was different. They were people who operated on a different basis. That was what impressed the world.

These Christians were characterized, not by self-centeredness, not by self-aggrandizement, not by the philosophy of "me first, and the devil take the hindmost" as the world is, but they were characterized by love and acceptance and understanding and tolerance. Many have heard the remark quoted frequently about the early Christians, "How these Christians love one another." That is what impressed the world of the first century. They called them, "those belonging to the Way," the way of love. There was something about them that reminded them of Jesus, who was himself "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." So they dubbed them "those belonging to the Way."

The third significant thing in this paragraph is that in the plan of God to reach this man, Saul of Tarsus, to arrest him and change the direction of his life, the Lord Jesus had evidently intended for this to take place on the way to Damascus. It is clear that he maneuvered Paul out of the land of Israel. When he got him outside the borders of the land, he then converted him. The reason for this was because this man was scheduled to be, in the program of God, the mighty Apostle to the Gentiles. The gospel up till this time had gone out only within the bounds of Israel. But it was never God's thought that it should be so limited. Now, in calling the man who is to carry it further, he takes him out of the land to convert him. This is the wonderfully graphic symbolism by which God underlines his truth. On the way to Damascus Paul was arrested, pursued by the relentless hand of Jesus Christ. This verse expresses this beautifully. Part of a larger poem, it says,

There blew a horn in Bethlehem,
Christ sat on Mary's knee.
"And Oh," she said, "my child," she said,
"They blow that horn for thee.
For thou shalt hunt the heart of man,
Thy prey, from hole to hole,
Till at the last thy little hands
Shall close upon his soul."

In the next section of Chapter 9 we have the story of how the hands of Jesus closed upon the soul of Saul of Tarsus:

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. {Acts 9:3-9 RSV}

This story of the conversion of Paul has been subjected to great scrutiny by many scholars and there have been many attempts to explain it on a natural level.

One of the earliest was to suggest that Paul was suffering from epilepsy; that on the road to Damascus he was suddenly seized by an epileptic fit and as he fell to the ground in this seizure he imagined that he heard voices. I remember well the remark of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great English preacher, when that explanation was first told him. He said, "O blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London could have epilepsy like that!"

There have been others who have suggested that Paul was hit by a stroke of lightning; that, as he neared the

city which was located on a plain at the foot of the mountains, an electrical storm broke out and Paul was suddenly struck by lightning. As he fell to the ground in his dazed condition he thought he heard a voice. But remarkable as that theory may be to explain the light brighter than the sun, it leaves unexplained other parts of the story.

Paul is utterly consistent throughout his whole life as to just what he heard and saw on this occasion. He says he saw the Lord Jesus. This was only the first of many occasions on which he saw the Lord. He was an apostle, and he bases his claim to be an apostle upon the fact that he had seen Jesus Christ. He heard his voice, he knew what it said, and what it said had great effect upon him. Therefore this was not a lightning stroke or an epileptic seizure; this is the appearance of Jesus Christ to this man who was to be the mighty Apostle to the Gentiles.

The first words that Jesus speaks to Saul of Tarsus are most significant. In the Garden of Eden, on that fateful day when man first fell, God came into the Garden and addressed a question to man. That question was very significant. It was, "Adam, where are you?" {cf, Gen 3:9}. There is a sense in which that is the question God is still asking men today. If Adam would think through that question he would find himself well on the road back. You cannot know the way back until you know where you are. Thus the first question God asks men who are without Christ today is, "Where are you?" Where are you in life? When you answer that you are on the way back.

But this question asked of Saul of Tarsus is also very significant. The Lord Jesus says to him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me? What is behind it, what are your motives? What are your reasons? What do you hope to accomplish? What is this that is driving you like this? Why are you persecuting me?" I am sure that in the hours of darkness that followed in Damascus, young Saul of Tarsus debated that question many, many times. Why? What was it that had driven him like this? What was it that motivated his life through all those years, that led to such violent activity against the program of God? In the answer to that question he would come a great understanding of himself and of human life.

Notice that the next thing Jesus says to him is also very significant. He says, "Arise and enter the city, and there you will be told what to do." That indicates a tremendous reversal of this man's whole approach to life. He is now experiencing the lifestyle which belongs to a Christian. "You are not your own; you are bought with a price. You will be told what to do." That is what conversion is: It is a change from thinking that you can run your own life, to an acknowledgment that God holds the program in his hands, and he has the right to tell you what to do. This was the first thing Paul experienced when he became a Christian, this right of Jesus Christ to be Lord, and to tell him what he was to do. Conversion is a revolutionary change of government resulting in a radical change in behavior. That is what happened to Paul. He was put on a wholly different lifestyle. He was told to go into the city. Now he would no longer be giving the orders. He would no longer be directing men and sending them where he wanted them to go and doing what he wanted to do, but he would be told what he was to do.

A number of years ago when Major Ian Thomas was here, he gave from this platform a remarkable recounting of the tremendous re-evaluation that came to Paul's life when he was converted on the Damascus road. I do not recall verbatim what Major Thomas said, but as I remember it his appraisal of Paul's experience went something like this: There was a time, Paul says,

... when, as Saul of Tarsus, I made my own independent evaluation of this man called Jesus of Nazareth: I investigated into his life to see if this leader of the Nazarene cult was worth following or not. I made my own independent evaluation of what he was worth. I was not unfair, I was not unkind; I applied to him all the normal, natural standards by which any life is evaluated, in any age. I used the normal standards for determining the worth of any individual at any time.

I looked first into his ancestry and discovered there was a cloud over his birth right from the start. As I investigated it, it became quite clear that he was the illegitimate son of a faithless woman, who had been taken in by a kind-hearted carpenter and raised as his own son. But he was an outcast from the beginning, and socially he was worth absolutely nothing. I investigated his professional standing, and I discovered that he was born of peasant stock and had attended no schools. He was raised as a simple carpenter in a village of no standing in Israel, and professionally he was worth absolutely nothing.

As Saul of Tarsus, I investigated his theological and ecclesiastical background. I found that he had sat at nobody's feet; he had been to no seminary; he had had no ecclesiastical or theological training. In fact, he was repudiated by all the ecclesiastical authorities of his day. He was nothing but an incorrigible street preacher and a tub-thumping rabble-rouser, and as far as his professional ecclesiastical and theological standing was concerned he was worth absolutely nothing.

Furthermore, I looked into his standing financially. I found he had no bank account; that he was born in a cave and laid in a borrowed manger and that he lived in other peoples' homes. He was an incorrigible scrounger; he was always borrowing things. He borrowed money to pay his taxes, he borrowed his clothes from other people, he rode around on a borrowed donkey; he died on a borrowed cross, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Financially, from the standpoint of the accumulation of this world's goods, he was worth absolutely nothing. So as I investigated and applied to him the normal standards by which any life is evaluated, I discovered that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was not worth following. He was worth nothing.

But on the Damascus road something happened. There, in the blinding flash of a moment, I looked into the face of a man, and I saw God. I discovered that he whom I thought to be worth nothing was the Lord of everything; that he was the God of glory, that everything that is made is upheld by the word of his power; that he is behind all things, and he is the very imprint and image of God. There I found that he whom I thought to be nothing, was everything, and I, whom I thought to be everything, was nothing. In that moment I came to a tremendous reversal of all the values of my life. Later I learned that I, who was nothing, could be filled with him who was everything; and that would make my life something.

Surely that is what we have in this remarkable account. It has always seemed to me that here is a striking parallel to the process of photography. God, in a sense, took a picture of Jesus Christ at this moment, and printed it upon the soul of this young man, Saul of Tarsus. From that moment on, anyone who looked at Paul the Apostle never saw Paul; he saw Jesus Christ. The fundamental principle of photography is to take light-sensitive salts, spread them on a film, and keep them in total darkness until the precise moment when what you want recorded is exposed to it. That is what happened to Saul of Tarsus. He was a young man, very sensitive to the things of God, and yet kept in darkness until the moment when the light was exposed. In that blinding light he saw an image, the image of Jesus Christ. It was printed indelibly upon his soul. After an exposure to light film is always kept in darkness to develop. It is put down into dark and bitter waters for awhile, and that is also what we find here. The newest apostle was led by the hand into the city of Damascus where for three days and nights he neither ate nor drank, while the image to which he was exposed was developed and imbedded unforgettably in his heart. Saul of Tarsus was crucified, and Jesus Christ was seen in his life from then on.

In the next section we see the Lord Jesus moving further to prepare this man, to reclaim him from the worthlessness of his empty life which he had thought was so full, to redeem him and to set him on the path of true value.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias said, "Lord, I have heard much from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine..." {Acts 9:10-15a RSV }

Now Paul is converted. Now he is a Christian. And what is the first thing he experienced as a Christian? The life of the body of Christ. That is wonderful, is it not? Two unknown, obscure Christians are sent to him. He meets them and is immediately helped by the strengthening that can come from the body, from other Christians. First there is a man named Judas. That is all we know about him. Saul is led to his house whom he has never met before. While he is there a man named Ananias is sent to minister to him.

Is there not a joyful, poetic irony about this, that the Holy Spirit has chosen two names which are tainted

names elsewhere in the New Testament, Judas and Ananias. These names belong to two other people: Judas the betrayer of our Lord; and Ananias, the first Christian to manifest the deceit and hypocrisy of an unreal life. Yet, here are two people, bearing the same names, that are honored and used of God. It is just a little touch, but it seems so much like the Holy Spirit to use names like this.

These men come and minister to Paul. Ananias was understandably reluctant to come. Saul had been ready to drag people off to prison and put them to death because they were Christians, and so he is understandably hesitant. But the Lord reassures him, telling him to go because Saul is praying.

That is the first mark of a Christian; he begins to pray. He recognizes that God rules, and there is a relationship between man and God, and so he begins to pray. God says to Ananias, "You needn't be afraid of a man who prays. Go to him, because he is praying." Thus Saul of Tarsus began to experience the joy of body life through these other Christians ministering to him.

Then notice that he is called and given a specific ministry.

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." {Acts 9:15-16 RSV}

Two things Paul was told about his ministry:

One, where it would be manifested. It was to be to three groups. First, to the Gentiles, that great body of pagans outside of Israel who knew not the name of God and who were involved in pagan practices and worship. The Gentiles are the non-Jewish nations of the world. To them this man would be sent. It was his primary obligation, to go to the Gentiles. Later he would call himself the *Apostle to the Gentiles*.

The second area of ministry was to kings. He was to penetrate the power structures of the day in which he lived. He was to speak to those at the top, to minister to those who were in positions of authority and influence. Throughout the book of Acts you will find the record of his appearing again and again before governors, procurators, kings, and finally even the emperor himself. This man was called to witness to the up-and-outs, as well as to the down-and-outs.

Then, third, he was to be a minister to the sons of Israel. That was last on the list. Paul always wanted to put it first. We shall see, as we trace the further story of Acts, that there was a struggle in this young man's life. He longed to be the instrument by which Israel would be redeemed. He wanted to minister primarily to the Jews and he felt he was equipped to do so. But he was not running the program anymore; God was. God had a struggle with him to teach him this, but this was the order he followed. Although he had great impact upon his own nation, the sons of Israel, he was primarily the minister to the Gentiles.

Then the Lord revealed how he was to make his impact. "I will show him," he said, "how much he must suffer for my name's sake." He was called to suffer. There is a word we do not like -- *suffer*. Yet the Christian life invariably involves suffering. This same man will write to the Philippians and tell them that they were called not only to believe in Jesus but also to suffer for his name's sake. Why is that? Why is suffering a part of Christian life? Because, of course, suffering is the activity of love. It is love that bears hurt. Love suffers. It takes the blame, it takes the hurt, it is willing to endure. Anyone called to be a Christian must learn to suffer, must learn to love. Love is hurt in the process of loving. That is why, in this fallen world, love must always suffer. This man is called to enter into the sufferings of Jesus Christ because Jesus loves this world, loves fallen man and wants to redeem him. But he cannot redeem without being hurt in return. So this man is also called to be hurt. What a tremendously responsive instrument he became. How much he suffered in order that he might manifest the love of the heart of God for a lost and wicked world.

When we are called to follow Jesus Christ, we are called to suffer. We have to forgive. That hurts, doesn't it? We do not want to forgive; we want to hold out and take vengeance. We want our ego to be fed a little and our pride satisfied. But God has called us to suffer and forgive. That is part of the Christian life.

But finally, this man is not called to do this in his own strength: God never sends forth men at their own charges; he is called and equipped to do it.

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened. {Acts 9:17-19a RSV}

No one can manifest the suffering of Christian love without being filled with the Holy Spirit. This man needed such a filling. As Ananias laid his hands on him he was filled with the Holy Spirit. There were no tongues, no sign, no manifestation; there was simply a quiet infilling of the Holy Spirit, just as occurs today with anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit came to live in him, to dwell within him to fill his life and equip him to manifest the love, the suffering love, of Jesus Christ. That is what this man experienced.

Immediately it changed his vision. Scales fell from his eyes. I think this is both literal and symbolic. All those long, built-up prejudices of a Pharisee against Gentiles; all the bigotry, the pride and the prejudice that twisted and distorted his view of the Gentile world; all of it disappeared in one moment. This man saw the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, as men and women bearing the image of God and needing to be redeemed. He never again looked at them any longer as Jew and Gentile. He no longer saw those divisions. As he tells us himself, he learned to judge no man according to the flesh but to see in him only a potential subject for the kingdom of God.

Then, finally, he was baptized. He took his place as a Christian. He identified himself with those who bear the name of Jesus Christ. God has now prepared his instrument to carry the gospel out to all the nations of the world.

Is it not true that you and I are here this morning because of the conversion of the Apostle Paul? We have all been blessed through the conversion of this man. His life has made great impact upon every one of us. Not one of us would even be here if it were not for this mighty apostle to the Gentiles.

So, as we close, we are just going to stand quietly together and join in a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the ministry of this man. Let us understand that we can be changed even as Paul was, if we discover the same principle that he discovered, that we who are nothing can be filled with him who is everything -- and that will make us something!

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, thank you for this amazing story of this amazing transformation in the life of Saul of Tarsus. Thank you for the impact his life has had upon the world, this man who has changed the course of human history and who would have been an unknown name, lost in the dust of the centuries had he never had this encounter on the Damascus road. But, because he was put in touch with Him who is everything, Him who runs the universe, Him to whom all power in heaven and earth is committed, he became an unforgettable name, a name of impact in human history. Lord, teach us mighty lessons by this same truth. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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