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# **TURNING THINGS AROUND**

## **BIBLE STUDY MONTH**

**Week Three**

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018**

**Acts 9:1-22**

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It was just after 3 pm on Sunday, 4 December 2005, when police were called to North Cronulla Beach. There was a report that two off-duty surf lifesavers had been assaulted by four members of a group of Middle Eastern men. It actually started as a verbal exchange with three lifesavers and a group of four young Lebanese men accusing each other of staring at them. Punches were thrown and one of the lifesavers was badly hurt after falling and striking his head.

This incident was reported widely across Sydney media, particularly on talkback radio with one broadcaster endorsing a listener's suggestion that bikie gangs be brought down to Cronulla to deal with these "Lebanese thugs".

Things escalated as it was later revealed that over 270,000 individual text messages were transmitted inciting a racially motivated confrontation at Cronulla Beach. A week later around 5,000 people gathered in and around Cronulla. Clashes took place. Racist slogans were chanted as people with a middle-eastern appearance were set upon and assaulted.

This prompted retaliation. Locals from Punchbowl and Arncliffe gathered, armed reportedly with bars, baseball bats and machetes. A convoy of more than 40 cars drove down to the beaches seeking revenge. The group assaulted several people, knocking one unconscious and threatening others. Between 60 and 100 cars were damaged and at least one was torched.

What became known as the "Cronulla Riots" is a sad chapter in this nation's history. The events here highlight serious dangers that occur when people become single-minded, zealous and even fanatical about preserving their honour and defending what they think is right.

Such fanaticism is not new. Its entrenched in world history and it has fostered intolerance, conflict and violence of unspeakable dimensions.

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Stephen, the first martyr of the early church, was one such victim of this zeal. Chosen as a leader of a movement that was rocking ancient Jerusalem, Stephen focussed all his energy on bearing witness to the crucified, risen messiah named Jesus Christ. In doing so, Stephen antagonised those who sought to rigorously defend the tradition. Accusing Stephen of blasphemy against established teachings, Stephen was seized by an angry crowd, brought before the authorities on trumped-up charges and publically stoned to death.

And standing right there in midst of this outburst of self-righteous mob violence, guarding the executioner's coats and giving a nod to this most brutal persecution, was a man named Saul. He was a Pharisee, a member of an elite Jewish group commissioned to protecting the Law of Moses and all its requirements.



Saul was extremely zealous in his work and we learn that he subsequently led reprisals against those who followed Jesus by literally *“ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison”* (Acts 8:2).

Now, Saul was deeply offended and horrified by this new Jesus movement. Believing that God had called Israel to be a light to the nations, this story of Jesus and a crucified messiah who had been raised from the dead was, to Saul, sheer nonsense. It was an embarrassment and it brought Judaism into disrepute.

And Saul's commitment to the cause was nothing short of fanatical. In Acts 9 we learn Saul continued *“to breath threats of murder against the disciples of the Lord”* (Acts 9:1).

Saul goes to the high priest seeking permission to detain and imprison those who followed Jesus. And with cap in hand, Saul sets out for the city of Damascus to hunt down these despised and so-called deluded people. But we know that on his way Saul, who we come to know as Paul, experiences a defining moment, a turning point which sets his life off a whole new direction.

Here Saul is overcome by a light as he hears the voice of Jesus. Left blinded by this amazing encounter, Saul stumbles into the city where he is commissioned through the ministry of Ananias to bring the name of Jesus *“before Gentiles, and kings, and before the people of Israel”* (Acts 9:15).

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Friends this represents one of the most profound turning points in history. A zealous, fanatical defender of Israel's ancient traditions is set apart to bear witness to the very thing he cursed!

Those who followed Jesus were afraid at first. How could it be that this man, Saul, was now bearing witness to Jesus with such passion and commitment after recently attempting to rid the land of this very faith?

The story of Saul on the road to Damascus is a watershed in the development of the early church. A diehard, fanatical persecutor of the faith becomes that faith's most eloquent spokesperson. A zealous, single-minded oppressor of the Jesus movement becomes its most famous evangelist!

And this amazing apostle goes on to Antioch, through Asia Minor to Greece and finally to Rome. Along the way he is shipwrecked, imprisoned and finally gives his life in the course of this passionate, spirited mission.

Indeed, the term 'Damascus Road experience' has entered our vocabulary and is used when referring to defining moments in one's life.

Now, a word of caution is needed here. Not everyone, indeed the clear majority of Jesus followers, never experience such a watershed moment in their lives as Saul did. And that doesn't mean our faith is in any way inferior. That doesn't mean our commitment is in any way lacking. Most of us are simply "plodders" in the faith.

We either grow up in the church or we are quietly drawn to faith through the example of others or by means of an invitation from friends. I, myself, am in this camp. But I never cease to be astounded or astonished by Jesus and by what he has done for me.

Friends, the point of this story concerning Saul, who we now come to know as Paul, is this. God can turn things around. God can touch people's lives, sometimes in the most dramatic of ways. Other times it may be a quiet moment or a silent touch. But no-one is beyond the reach of God. Moreover, what is seen as perplexing, confusing, disrupting or destructive can be transformed by God into a force for immense good!

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And that is what the story of the Acts of the Apostles is all about. The impact of who Jesus is doesn't stop with his mission on this earth. The loving, graceful, renewing power of Jesus' presence continues in the life and the witness of those who claim Jesus is Lord. And importantly, this powerful presence goes on to challenge, confront and transform even the most formidable opponents.

For us here in Australia, the greatest challenge, the biggest opponent, may not be the fear of persecution or the distress of being pursued, bound and imprisoned because of our faith. While tempers flared in Cronulla thirteen years ago, the general consensus in our wider society concerning Christian faith and the witness of the church is, I believe, one of indifference, disinterest and, unfortunately, cynicism.

'Who cares' and why would one choose to be part of an institution, who in some quarters, remained silent as the most vulnerable were harassed and abused? Who wants to be part of a community who appears to sanction the status-quo, align itself with popularist views of the day or project an image of simply being nice to one another while clinging to past things of as if they are God-ordained?

I often feel the biggest challenge to us as the church today is not the fiery persecution from a hothead like Paul. Rather it's a laissez-faire approach that is ingrained with a cosy, congenial attitude of conformity, convenience and indifference.

And here the Acts of the Apostles steps in to rock such a worldview. The Acts of the Apostles barges its way in as it prods our complacency declaring Jesus is actually with us, Jesus is definitely here to make a difference!

For you see, the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is a story that says God is very much alive and active in the world. It's a story that says God is clearly not finished with the world. And this, my friends, means God is not done with either you or me!

While indifference, cynicism, disappointment, confusion, fatigue and even a loss of nerve may inflict the church today, God has not given up on us just yet. Indeed, God never gives up on us!

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The church, in all its complexity, its achievements, its joys, its vulnerability and its failure – IS the church. And it is my hope, indeed it is my prayer that we will stick with it, that we will continue to contribute and participate in it, that we will welcome others and invite family, friends and neighbours to be part of it.

We don't have to be a hyper-active, super-hero like Paul. But we can learn from his experience that God turns things around. We may not encounter bright lights or hear voices from heaven but we can be assured that God is with us on the way, that the living, transforming power of Jesus Christ is gifted to us despite our weakness, our vulnerability, our confusion, our fatigue and our failures.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God turned that blood thirsty, single-minded fanatic, Saul, around to become Paul the greatest evangelist, teacher and church planter of all time.

During this Bible Study month do open your Bibles and read this marvellous story in the Acts of the Apostles. Reflect on the text and prayerfully listen to what God is saying to you.

For God turned things around for Paul – and God can, and I have no doubt will, continue to do just that. God will turn things around for us and for the church.

Friends, this is the Good News. Listen to it. Hear it. Take it on board and receive it in your hearts – right here and now!

Amen.



**\*(see over for questions/discussion)**

## **ACTS 9:1-22**

*Meanwhile 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 who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

*Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'*

*So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.*

## **QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION**

- **Why do you think Saul persecuted the followers of Jesus? Can you understand why he did so?**
- **Why do you think God chose Saul to bring the name of Jesus to "Gentile, and kings and before the people of Israel"?**
- **Saul experienced a massive "turning" in his life. Have you experienced a "turning" in your life? If you are able, share this with another.**
- **What "turnings" do you believe need to take in your life? In the world and the local community? In the church?**