

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship  
Sunday 07 July 2013

## Speaking Boldly      Acts 9:19-31 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?' <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

<sup>23</sup> After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. <sup>25</sup> But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

<sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

<sup>31</sup> Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

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### **Introduction**

There are Christians in the world today who live in constant fear of real, physical persecution – some of them even death for their faith. But most Christians, especially those of us in the UK, know virtually nothing about that life, and we rarely - if ever - encounter real persecution. The early church however, faced that kind of thing all the time. They had to be on their guard, and constantly aware of those who sought to destroy them. Saul was the chief among those persecutors in the early days of the church, but then rumours began to spread that not only had he ceased his damaging behaviour, but he'd actually become one of them.

Well, there were obvious questions that needed to be asked about whether or not he could be trusted. Was it beyond the realm of possibility for example, that Saul could have faked his conversion then followed through with this charade for months, perhaps even years, in order to work his way into the presence of the leaders, the apostles, and gain their trust? If he was really a phoney, but somehow managed to infiltrate their ranks, the whole movement could be brought to its knees in one fell swoop!

It's easy to see why the church might have felt nervous and reacted with such hesitancy, but I think there's a lot more to this particular story than first meets the eye. There was of course a natural and perfectly understandable distrust of Saul – everybody knew what he'd been up to, but this morning, I'd like us to try and enter into this story and imagine ourselves in a similar position. Imagine that someone came out publicly, and declared themselves an opponent of OCF. Imagine that they began to gain the power and support necessary to destroy everything that OCF stands for, everything that we value. Imagine that they began speaking publicly of wiping out the church; hunting down every single member and making an example of them so that other Christians in other places would think twice about remaining loyal to this movement of Messiah people.

Now imagine how you'd feel if this persecutor of OCF, this person, led an effort to have one of the senior leaders, let's say Mike, dragged out into the street and murdered whilst everyone else was there to watch. Can you even begin to fathom how difficult that would be? What would you be feeling? How difficult would Jesus words to "love your enemy" seem under those circumstances? How hard do you think it would be for us, as a church, to deal with? What would you tell Adie, his widow and his children? How challenging would you find it to continue preaching about eternal hope in the resurrection, and unfailing commitment to love those who persecute you? That would take quite some conviction wouldn't it?

Can you begin to imagine all of that, and by putting yourself into this story? How would you feel about the man who'd persecuted your church, killed one of the senior leaders, and then threatened to come back and finish off the rest of the believers too? How would you feel if a few years later, he turned around and said that he now believed in your Messiah, and not only wanted your forgiveness, but would like to join the congregation? You'd be forgiven for having doubts. I think we all would. But friends, overcoming those doubts would be the easy part!

Can you imagine loving the man who'd done all this, as a brother, and allowing him to move freely among you? Can you imagine the friends, the family and widow of your deceased senior leader doing the same? I'm not suggesting they couldn't, or that they wouldn't ... what I'm saying is that Christianity like this is not for the faint-hearted. It's not for the weak of stomach. But it's exactly what we see in the early church. The situation Luke describes here is far from run-of-the-mill religion. This is what happens when a community of people take to heart, and seriously follow, the call of Jesus to live by love (John 13:34-35).

**<sup>34</sup>'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'**

After his incredible conversion and baptism into Christ (something that Tom was talking about last week), the Bible says that Saul spent several days with the disciples, but it was far more than just enjoying some fellowship. He immediately begins to preach that Jesus IS the Son of God. This sudden and dramatic switch from everything he'd ever believed and preached about before that point was, to say the least, confusing to everybody in Damascus. To try and place this into a more modern context, it must have seemed (to them) about as shocking as Osama Bin Laden (if he were still alive) appearing on national TV and espousing the great qualities of the United States of America, identifying himself as a US patriot, and seeking citizenship in the land of the free, and the home of the brave! Nobody had any idea what to make of it. They were completely astounded.

In verse 19 we read that Saul only spent a few days in Damascus. Following this, we know that he went to Arabia (not what we'd know as modern day Arabia, but to a smaller area quite close to where he was already). During that time he continued to preach the gospel, and apparently made an enemy of the Arabian king. In verse 23, Luke mentions, "after many days had gone by" ... what that actually means is the passing of three intervening years ... Saul returns to Damascus, in fear for his life. The Arabian king was pursuing him, and he needed friends to help him escape by lowering him over the wall in a basket. Actually, if you read this more closely, it's clear that these people are more than friends - Luke refers to them as being followers - proof, that in the intervening period, Saul has gone from being a ruthless Christian persecutor, to something of a leader, and someone worth following.

Acts chapter nine doesn't provide details of the rest of his journey, but by the time Saul arrives in Jerusalem, it's easy to assume that he's reached safety and will be greeted with open arms, but that wasn't the case either. He was met by believers who were committed to living just as Jesus had taught them, but still nonetheless human, with human fears, hurts and feelings. In his former life, Saul had caused them enormous damage and killed one of their brothers, a man called Stephen. Here he was again, a few years later, this time wanting to be accepted and welcomed by them. He needed someone who believed in him, someone who could testify to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in his life, and he found such a friend in Barnabas.

In the context of everything that has happened before, I think verse 28 seems all the more remarkable. The Bible tells us Saul was welcomed and accepted into the Christian community, and he moved freely among them. It's difficult to describe, to put into words just how much love, forgiveness and belief in this new way of living, this new calling of Jesus, must have been required for them to accept Saul as one of their own. From a worldly point of view it was a crazy notion, but here in Jerusalem, they were becoming the community of love that Jesus had said they would be, and they truly knew how to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44-45).

**<sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven.**

When Saul continued his preaching activities in Jerusalem, mainly among the Hellenistic Jews, they became contentious to the point that they wanted to kill him. It wasn't long before Saul began to realise just how much he was going to suffer for this new life in Christ. The believers knew that he needed to go elsewhere, so they sent him first of all to Caesarea and eventually back home to Tarsus.

### **Application**

Saul's conversion from persecutor of the church to proponent of Jesus, was nothing short of amazing. It would surely have seemed to most people in the early church, that Saul was completely beyond conversion? It would have seemed impossible. But what's impossible with man is perfectly possible with God. Perhaps we should take a moment to think about this. Is there a Saul in your life? Who is it? Who seems beyond conversion to you? Why don't you make a commitment to spend some time praying for them? Why don't you get intentional? If God can turn Saul around, why not the person that you're thinking of?

The title for the message this morning is "Speaking Boldly", but I'm not entirely sure which direction Mike was expecting me to take with this. If I asked most people, they'd probably assume that the title I've been given referred to Saul, and the boldness with which he started preaching the gospel. There was no way of stopping him once the Holy Spirit took hold of his life! It's well known that it was through Saul (who later became known as Paul), the gospel reached the Gentiles as well, but I don't think he's the only hero in this story.

Barnabus spoke pretty boldly too. He took a risk by standing up and being prepared to defend Saul, testifying to the authenticity of his conversion. At a point in time when most of the other believers were filled with doubt, he was certain of what he knew, and wasn't afraid to admit it. Barnabus had conviction. He bore a faithful witness to the work of the Holy Spirit, and this would undoubtedly have encouraged Saul too. Had it not been for Barnabus, I can't imagine Saul would ever have been accepted by the believers in quite the same way that he was. Barnabus deserves some credit here too.

This morning though, as I'm coming into land, I want to leave you with one final thought – a bit of a curveball. I want to suggest that someone else was speaking boldly in this story, well a group of people actually. I think the early church spoke boldly too. Not so much in words ... but by their actions. They loved, they forgave, they accepted and they welcomed. Luke ends this chapter with the phrase "Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it (the early church) increased in numbers." In its own kind of way, I think that's speaking boldly too, and perhaps it should be a challenge for us – when other people look at OCF, how 'loudly' is our witness (living example) being 'heard' by them?