

## Reflection on Saul /Paul – Denise and Graham Smith

I thought I would start by looking at the history surrounding Saul to try to understand a bit more about him.

Saul was from a very wealthy Jewish family and they were awarded Roman citizenship.

Saul was thought to have been born about AD 5 and sometime around AD 10 they moved to Jerusalem .

It is suggested between AD15 --AD20 Saul began his studies of the Hebrew scriptures under the Rabbi Gamaliel. It was with this famous Rabbi that Saul would've had an in depth study of the law .

Saul would've most probably been at the trial of Stephen, who was sentenced to death by stoning, that resulted in Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr.

Saul would've approved of this mob's murderous action and would've carried on with these trials and actions against all the Christians he could find in Jerusalem, even wrecking their churches and arresting all Christian men and women and putting them into Jail .

Saul was full of hatred for the Christians, so when he heard about the Christian movement in Damascus and how it was being to grow he set off for Damascus with a posse of men intent on destroying the Christians .

Can you imagine how the Christians in Damascus would be feeling after hearing all about what Saul had done in Jerusalem, and now he was on the road and heading for them.

The fear in the Christians must've been terrifying, and I think some of them would've been horrified at the thought of him rounding them up, then bringing them back to Jerusalem for trial, that would end in them being thrown into jail and possibly facing execution .

On the road to Damascus Saul was suddenly surrounded by a bright light that flashed from Heaven and he heard a voice say to him

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me ?"

"Who are you Lord ?" Saul asked. He then fell to the ground .

The posse of men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They saw this bright light like a lightning strike. They heard the voice but could see no man there. They were very frightened; they did not understand the voice of the one speaking to him .

When Saul got up he was blind, even though his eyes were open he could not see. So the men led him into Damascus where Saul refused to eat and drink anything for 3 days but spent his time continually praying .

A disciple called Ananias who lived in Damascus was told by the Lord in a vision "Arise, get up and go to a street called straight, and at the house of Judas. Find the man from Tarsus called Saul. At this moment he is praying but he has been shown a vision that you are coming. You are to lay your hands upon him and restore his sight."

Now Ananias had heard about this Saul of Tarsus and the evil he had done against Christians, so he must've felt very worried. Perhaps he was very frightened at the thought of going to see Saul, but God had reassured him.

God said to him, "I have chosen Saul to take my name to the Gentiles, their Kings and the people of Israel. I will show him how much he has to suffer for my name "

So Ananias went and found Saul where at once he laid his hands upon Saul telling him "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - he has sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit "

Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again .He got up and was baptised .

I was thinking that God had made the perfect choice in Saul to carry out his mission to the Gentiles as he was an expert in Jewish Law, so he could defend himself against his accusers and all through this reading.

He had been called Saul. I always thought, after his conversion that it was at this point he changed his name to Paul, but I was wrong. He never changed his name because as his family were Roman citizens he always had two names, being known by his Jewish name Saul and his Roman name Paul. This was to help him if he was ever accused by non Jews, then he could be tried by a Roman court .

He started his preaching in his name of Paul, but I don't think he realised just how hard this mission was going to be for him.

He set up many churches, but he was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, whipped, thrown into prison, put on trial all the time preaching the message of Jesus and getting it across to people .

Of the twenty seven books of the New Testament, thirteen of these books are attributed to Paul or his traveling companion. We owe a lot to Paul .

I think that Paul still has a message for us all today. The world at the moment is suffering this Covid 19 and we are wondering if we will ever recover from it. But Paul through all his suffering never gave up, and like him we must not give up. We too must keep our faith in Jesus and Jesus, just like he did for Paul, will give us the courage to see this through.

We have seen the suffering of the NHS Doctors and Nurses making tough decisions each day, the different sacrifices they have made by keeping the distances from their own families to look after the very sick and the dying, being there with them as they fight to breathe or sadly take their last breath.

I think the world has looked on and taken a leaf out of their book and started to look out for the people in our own communities and do acts of kindness from simply doing some shopping or knocking on a door to see how someone is coping or a million and one other things.

People are starting to form bonds with one another again in neighbourly love and it's extending out throughout the world. We have seen Italy singing with each other from their balconies, in Spain the policemen forming a dance troupe to entertain people, to keep their spirits up whilst they remain at home. Here we are doing the Thursday night applause for all the key workers who are working around the clock to keep life as near as normal as possible for us all.

Let us pray that when this Covid 19 has gone we continue to value and appreciate each other and continue to love one another, just as Jesus taught us all to, and remember all that Paul went through for his faith because like Paul our faith won't stop us suffering. But it will offer us ways of coping through it, by prayer or by using social media to keep in touch with family and friends or by getting to know our neighbours by talking again to one another and learning to trust one another which is a big hurdle to climb over. It has made us look outside not only of our homes but of ourselves. I for one pray that this new found freedom continues after this Covid 19 has long gone and our lives just like Paul are changed for ever. Amen