Title: Crooked Ways Made Straight

Main Text: Acts 9:1-20

Supplemental Texts: Galatians 1:11-16

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Have you come across a friend lately with some problems and thought – "Golly,…I don't know how that is going to get straightened out???" People are born unto trouble as sparks fly upwards… So, from time to time many of us find ourselves in a doozy of a situation and it is not always that we are at fault either. Whenever these times surface, some confused, dysfunctional and crooked ways of thinking, living or being are usually at the root. ***Overtime,*** **things build and then there is a *peak that pushes us over the edge often to something unexpected.***

In the story of Saul (who becomes Paul), we see someone on a road that has become blinded, he stops eating and drinking…. and no one would have thought he would go from persecutor to say what – follower and promoter of Jesus Christ in just three days (***UNEXPECTED!!!!***). Yet God reveals himself to Saul, he shows us that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace and his forgiveness. In a world where we want to see more and more people know the love that God has for them in Jesus Christ, THAT THEY CAN HAVE relationship with GOD and experience healing …. it is a good thing to know that there is no crooked way that God's grace can't straighten out.

LET'S TALK PAUL FOR A MOMENT

For those of us who have been following Jesus for a long time, we really don't think about Paul's nasty past because of his contributions to the church and his writings which have be preserved in the NT.

There is a massive record of Paul in our NT that consumes our attention. **Paul is the bringer of the gospel to the Gentiles,** he goes on three missionary journeys to share the message of Jesus everywhere. **HE ENDURES** opposition, hardships and trials for sharing Jesus with others. **HE WRITES** pastoral letters showing he genuinely cares about those he evangelized. **HE IS A MAN OF CHARACTER.** So, he speaks truth and sets the bar high – yet he ALSO recognizes the thorns in his flesh. **HE IS A MAN OF SOUND THEOLOGY, WHICH** is evident from his writing of Romans in which he roots the gospel message in the Jewish tradition**. If it wasn't for this story of his dramatic conversion**, we wouldn't remember the ugliness of his past.

LET'S TALK - TROUBLE

Today's portion of scripture re-acquaints us with Saul – which include his nasty, not so nice beginnings. He was a part of a growing movement of men of Israel actively seeking to stop the movement of those following Jesus, or a group called THE WAY.

The trajectory of Saul's posture towards persecuting Christians was developed and fed over a few key incidents prior to chapter 9. We will briefly explore those. In a recent episode of the questioning of Peter and other apostles before the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel sets a standard on persecution for the Jewish community. In Acts 5, Gamaliel convinces the Sanhedrin to just give the apostles a warning and flogging and send them away. Shifting to Acts 7, the persecution standards intensify in the scenario with Stephen versus the Sanhedrin. He is stoned to death for speak out for Jesus and against the former way of Judaism. Scripture notes, this is where Saul comes

on scene in the movement of persecution. He is at the stoning of Stephen and looking on with great approval.

The next thing noted comes in Acts 8 which describes that Saul has taken it upon himself to destroy the church. He is personally hauling men and women into prison by going house to house to find those who are followers of the Way of Jesus (Acts 8:3). Saul is very ambitious to see that those who are following Jesus, calling on his name are dealt with **in Jerusalem**.

Moving on to Acts 9, Saul has escalated this mission even further – he is ready to persecute followers of the WAY **wherever** they may be found. Walking away from Jerusalem muttering murderous threats and heading on to Damascus. He has a letter obtained from the high priest of Jerusalem in his hands. It gives Saul the permission to haul Christians into the synagogue in Damascus to question and deal with them as necessary -- prison would be a good place to start. He won't let anything delay him or deter him from this mission. And that sums up the unsavoury condition of Saul.

We can observe from a distance that Saul has great pride in his knowledge of Judaism. He has gain position of influence enough to get documents from the right people. He has power to do persecution wherever. We can also see that it doesn't matter if they are public speaking of Jesus, or someone who is behind the scenes at home and quiet ---- he will find them and deal with them.

LET'S TALK – OUR WORLD

Even though we are living in an age of tolerance in the Western world, the persecution of people has not gone by the way side.

Persecution[1] and act to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict especially those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook, *specifically* **:** to cause to suffer because of belief.

There are leaders in our world that are overcome with pressure, using their position, holding on to pride and directing their power to control others in ways that constitutes as ill treatment and persecution. And they too are muttering at times threats.

It is hard not to make a connection with situations south of our border as an example. In the issue of the deportation of Venezeulans , Trump has been said to have taken the Alien Enemies act a step too far. There is a gang that is alleged by the particular voice to have had intention to invade the US. *While things are being added to this story daily and it is changing*, an article that I was perusing said that a, "…the court properly ruled that the president lacks authority simply to declare that there's been an invasion of the U.S. and then invoke an 18th century wartime authority during peacetime.[2]" When a whole lot of adrenalin gets flowing and it is an emotionally charged situation,… and then you layer on that position, pride and power,… some crooked outcomes are bound to happen. Such outcomes can appear like they will never get sorted out – at least not anytime soon.

But, it is not just high level leaders either, average people can be persecuting and more so at the level of discrimination. Discrimination is a form of persecution that doesn't have the physical harm so much, but acts with prejudice or prejudicial outlook, action or treatment. All of us can find ourselves at times on a learning curve with regards to discrimination because we don't usually see it in ourselves. We can be caught in our own layers of pride, power and position too.

Moving along, it is not a stretch to make a conclusion either that when power, position and pride are behind an action – persecution is bound to happen and that is particularly crooked. In my opinion and maybe you might share it too, persecution (and discrimination) occurs as a repeated action, not a one time misjudgement scenario – that can be especially crooked way of living and being. ***When we understand the concept of Imago Dei*** – that each one of us is made in God's image, persecution has no place – and that is a crooked way that need be made straight.

LET'S TALK – FINDING HOPE

Returning to our text, when Saul walks on the Damascus Road to Jerusalem with his agenda in hand, his crooked ways are about to be made straight by the grace of God.

In the light flashing all around and the voice from heaven, Saul crooked thinking about Jesus not being a deity are set straight. The bright light from heaven flashed and Saul sank to the ground, overcome --- a voice said to him **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"**

This call out to Saul is done is a way to establish that the Lord is speaking. Knowing the scriptures, Saul would know this is how it happened to Abraham when he is just about to cut his son in two on the altar - the Lord says "Abraham, Abraham…, Here I am Lord"(Gen 22:11-12). It was how it happens to Jacob when he goes to Egypt during the famine "Jacob, Jacob,...Here I am Lord (Gen 46:2-3). It happens to Moses at the burning bush, "Moses, Moses,... Here I am (Ex 3:4). It happened to Samuel when he served under Eli, "Samuel, Samuel,... Speak Lord". **So, this double**

name call to Saul, is meant to have him know that the Lord is speaking to him.

At the same time, Saul has to be very confused why the Lord would be asking him about persecution. He is not aware of persecuting the Lord after all. Seeking clarification, Saul asks “Who are you, Lord?” (verse 9).... Then voice speaking to him says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (verse 5). This exchange here, is a very concise, memorable link of thoughts for Saul to hang on to. In a nutshell, just as Lord that spoke to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses and to Samuel, the Lord is speaking to SAUL – AND at the very same time that Lord is identifying himself as Jesus. And, this of course, has been the very thing Paul has been fighting against as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin - **Jesus being deity!** Paul cannot walk away from this without his crooked way of thinking of Jesus not being set straight – namely that **Jesus is Lord**.

Moving to the actions of Saul falling to the ground and becoming blind,… here Saul’s crooked thinking regarding his pride, his power and his position are being shattered. Saul falls to his knees with the bright light flashing around him. It exposes him in every way, as an x-ray exposes bones, but way more intense than that. **In the greek, the word for fall is Piptos** – it has a spiritual meaning of falling under the weight of one’s sin. In that ***more than*** x-ray light – Saul is humbled by his motives and conviction being exposed through and through for what they are.

As the light vanishes, Paul finds himself complete blind. He is then led down the road as if he were a child, an invalid…. To a house on Straight Street (how interesting!!!). He sits in a condition of

blindness – he doesn't eat nor drink. This is a sign that he is percolating about his posture and persecution. This KIND OF FASTING is from the Jewish tradition and is usually a work of repentance used to seek out understanding from the Lord. This part of the story shows a ***once confident, proud and up and comer in Judaism*** being been thoroughly humbled and he is lost in more than one way. **Saul's crooked ways are being cracked under the bright lights and the ensuing blindness.**

As the Lord sends Ananias to help, Saul's crooked ways of thinking about deity (including God and Jesus) are reconfigured yet again!!! Ananias arrives to help Saul because the Lord recruits him in a vision. Just to follow the story, Ananias makes no bones about saying to the Lord that he does want to go because of Saul's reputation for arresting all who call on Jesus' name. In obedience, Ananias does go. When he sees Saul, immediately, he calls him ***Brother Saul***, …it is as if he already belongs in the family – has he already had a change of heart??? From there he says "the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road sent me that you may be healed and be filled with the Holy Spirit" As he lays his hands on him, "immediately" scales fell away from Saul's eyes. The word "immediately" which is in the text concretely ties **action of the healing and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Lord Jesus**. At this point, Saul knows God, he knows Jesus as Lord and NOW he has been filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul has a Trinitarian experience of the God-head – that is a complete reworking of his ways of thinking of God in a short amount of time.

Over and above this all though, there is the manner in which this is all done! It is remarkable that God chose to make enemy number one **his chosen instrument**. God takes the crookedest man into his fold – to be the ONE to speak to Gentiles, to kings and the other peoples of Israel. Why not someone with a cleaner record, I don't know – but God does do anything arbitrarily – it is all purposefilled. God's action to chose Saul (in the GREEK -- chose = **eklogé** phoenetic pronunciation - ek-log-ay) was to take him "out from" and "to" a particular work.**Eklogé** as a Greek word has a spiritual sense that underscores that this choosing action is a work of God's grace and initiative directed towards his people. That it is a work of grace is further confirmed by the name of the one who does the healing. Ananias' name means "*the Lord is gracious*". **The overworking of Saul's crooked ways is done in a manner of grace!**

Paul gets it! In this encounter there is a genuine transformation -- he knows it is ALL GRACE, it is all grace, it is all grace THROUGH AND THROUGH! We see him write about that when he talks about his call to the Galatians chapter 1:15-16

*But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me **by his grace,** was **pleased to reveal his Son** in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles,…*

Paul had many crooked ways of thinking and living in the being outside of knowing Jesus, but his life transformation tells us **there isn't a crooked way that God's grace can't make straight**.

LET'S TALK -- HOPE FOR THE WORLD

Paul's ways with pride, position and power were straightened out in an encounter with Jesus -- that can happen in the lives of our friends, family and perhaps even you too – I can share a couple examples, but then we can consider how we might open ourselves and others up to a Damascus Road experience like Saul's to wrap this up.

With permission, I shared about a graduating student friend, JD who was raised culturally Christian. He attended Catholic church in his youth in India. Since moving to Canada at least eight years ago, he has not been attending church very often with his family. Over the course of his involvement with Fiction Fantasy and Faith on Tuesdays, Table Talk Thursdays and our NT in 40 Days – he had realized that he was living a Christian moral ethical life, yet in the group around him, others live their faith more integrated. He came to me one Table Talk Thursday saying that he thinks he needs to find a different church – and I said to him "let's talk about that…!" 😊 He is interested in learning more about following Jesus & taking his knowledge from his head to his heart. His next steps are looking for a church in Mississauga. Please pray for JD to continue on the way that the Holy Spirit is leading that he may know Jesus as Lord and Saviour of his whole life.

While on campus, I am coming into contact with Muslim students and that is a real challenge to minister to them. I took initiative to read **Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus**, by Nabeel Qureshi to expand my understanding of these people – but the story Nabeel has is amazing.

As a Muslim, he was taught three things about Jesus. That Jesus did not die, Jesus was not a deity, and he did not rise from the dead. David, a friend in

US college years, challenged him on these facts about Jesus and through research he came to believe there was a strong case for Christianity. He came to believe what Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, that he was raised from the dead you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9), He still struggled with the truth, so he also prayed for a dream (…Muslims ask for dreams to hear from God). In a dream, he saw a narrow door leading to a feast which look to be like heaven. His friend who had been witnessing to him about Jesus was in the room at the table. Seeing Nabeel at the doorway he remarked to him “... you haven’t accepted the invitation!” Nabeel awoke and sought out his friend to tell him about this dream. David directed him to read Luke 13. When he saw the title for the section “the Narrow Door” and read the story. He knew God was clearly inviting him to believe in Jesus as Lord and accept he had died and rose again. God took Nabeel’s crooked thinking about Jesus being Lord and made it straight.

Let’s get practical and talk about opening ourselves and others up for the Damascus Road experience where crooked ways get straight working through Saul’s transformation stages.

- **If you or someone you know does not believe in Jesus as Lord, I say to you – pray!** Pray for them to hunger to know for themselves that Christ is Lord and that they will make every effort to enter by the narrow door. There is so much busyness and distractions in this day and age - pray earnestly for them to pursue the narrow door while they still can.
- **If you or a person you know is stumbling along in the dark, wandering on a Damascus Road with blindness** – their

might be blindness from discouragement with their life circumstances, disillusionment with the church, mental illness, physical illnesses or relational conflicts. But their may be blindness from the opposite conditions of prosperity, absolute satiation, they are people who want for nothing. If this is the case, then I say to you – PRAY! that the Lord would be gracious to them, to give them ears to hear a messenger of hope & truth.

- **If you or someone you know, knows about Jesus but something feels a-miss in your experience** – so this could look like having enthusiasm sometimes and then not, reading the bible sometimes and not, …drifting, dabbling but never going far with anything. If you/they have already been baptized, there could be something sabotaging the Spirit's work in their life. Talking to a pastor can sort some of that out. If you/they are not baptized, well is the Lord asking you? What are you waiting for? Regardless of where that is at – that is another opportunity to PRAY - that Holy Spirit winds may blow through YOUR/THEIR soul and revitalize a faith that is less than it could be!

CONCLUSION

If there is anything that can be said of humans, they have a propensity to get some messed up and crooked situations whether it be because of power, position or pride. These actions often can result in ill treatment of others like discrimination or persecution. Nonetheless, , ... the story of Saul's conversion is one that gives us hope for all of us – even those in

positions of great authority in our world. If God can take a person like Saul, a murderous persecutor and transform him to be a leader of the church and writer of so many NT books, there is no doubt that he can do that for any situation, any system and any person. It doesn't matter how messed up the circumstances or the person may be. The Lord is gracious -- there isn't a crooked way of living or being that God's grace cannot make straight. Thanks be to God for this good news.

Closing Prayer

***includes slight adaptation to Isaiah 40:30-5*

Thank you for the hope we have from the life transformation of Saul found in scriptures today.

Lord, keep us from forming pride, defending positions and using power in harmful ways with others. There are many ways that are rough in our world and still rough within us,… they are not beyond your capacity. May we join with Isaiah in calling out in our world and to our own souls --

May the way of the LORD be prepared in this world, make straight in the desert to our and others souls, a direct highway to our God. May every valley be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; May crooked places be made straight and the rough places smooth;

That the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, so that WE MAY ALL see it together. Amen