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*From hatred to love –Saul to St. Paul – Entering, running & finishing the Race –  
Acts 9: 1-31*

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Heroic Olympic competitors like Duncan Scott, Duncan Yee & Georgia Taylor Brown know the importance of keeping going through years of painful preparation & straining every effort to reach out even to the very finish. Paul writes of the Christian life as a race in which all are invited to enter & complete. But How? Even if we don't know the potentially fatal *twisties* – momentary losses of balance & control of Simone Biles – some of us may know the debilitating, usually temporary loss of skills & poise, confidence & control. Are you tired & discouraged & feel like giving up? God through Christ is the pioneer & perfecter of our faith / the person on whom we can depend from start to finish - . Jesus had told His followers that they *were to be witnesses not just in Jerusalem & Judaea but also to the outsiders/mixed race immigrants of Samaria and to the ends of the earth.* **How?** - By the Spirit. **But Who** would take the lead?

**Saul of Tarsus:** After stoning of Stephen, followers of Jesus were scattered through Judea & Samaria. Through Philip, Finance Minister of Ethiopia had turned to trust Christ but who would lead work of bringing good news of Christ to the Roman Empire?

**No Nominating committee or professional head-hunter would have thought of Saul of Tarsus, let alone chosen him.....**

Brilliant intellect but an avowed enemy. Had seen & heard Jesus in words & actions of Stephen & other Christians, he was trying to root out. Saul a young legalist bigot – a Pharisee of Pharisees- as for legalistic righteousness, faultless, hated & despised Gentiles & as he later said in Acts 22 & 26, *“I was convinced that I ought to do all possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”* He couldn't /wouldn't accept that Jesus crucified had risen & is the Christ. Whole notion offensive! **But God knew best & had other plans. It is God's initiative & work & plan.**

**Christ met Him on that road. 140 miles Jerusalem to Damascus – trading hub to Iraq, Iran, Asia Minor, Armenia Arabia. On foot.** There was an escort of Sanhedrin police but Saul would walk alone– or so he thought! Walking alone was a chance to reflect & think over impact of Stephen & other martyrs & message of Christ. Needed encounter with living Christ & gift of Spirit. **Blinding light v. 4: Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? – knew it was the Lord. 5:–Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus whom you persecute.** Christians are the body of Christ Himself! He identifies with our suffering, feels our pain & takes it personally.

**Whether dramatic & sudden or more gradual, it is about encountering Christ –  
.....often through the less dramatic witness of members of Christ's body**

## **Second, Ananias: It requires courageous companions – Ananias**

.....Immediate response when Lord calls him is “**Yes, Lord**” (v.11) “*Go to the dreaded assassin/inquisitor/persecutor. This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles...* God can call us to speak to people without us having a clue as to how it will work out. Lord is sovereign. Don’t second guess God. So Ananias goes.

.....Saul, who became St. Paul, didn’t ease himself slowly into his newly found identity & calling. 19b: **At once** - Straight away, he started *preaching fearlessly in the name of Jesus in the synagogues* until his new Christian friends had to get him out to save his life. & then in Jerusalem too, **he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord** & engaged with the Grecian Jews until the same happened & he had to be got out for his life. Hated & shunned by the Jews, & like His Lord, someone who would suffer for his faith.

### **3. Feared & shunned by the disciples but 3<sup>rd</sup> hero = Barnabas**

**Rest were afraid but Barnabas took him & brought him to the apostles & spoke up for him.** Barnabas was the “*Encourager*”, who in Acts 11 later sent for Saul & got him involved & used in Antioch.

**What is X asking us to do & now?**

**& & lastly, note v. 16- God’s stark promise from the start:**

... *I will show him how much he must suffer for my sake.*

When we follow Jesus, He does not promise us - and we should not expect - a life free of any pain or suffering. Christians in Pakistan or Iran & many other places in the world today do not. Rest of Book of Acts & Paul’s letters report plenty of sufferings that St. Paul faced & came through – beaten, flogged, many dark nights & days & years in prison, chronic illness, left for dead, & by tradition, in end crucifixion in Rome – suffering & pressures that threatened to crush the faith & life out of him but could not.

.....Paul came to know the Grace & presence of the living Christ was more than sufficient for him – and will also be for us - in our weakness- & through prayers & practical support of so many fellow believers, who shared comfort & encouragement. (cf 2 Corinthians 1:1-1). Paul recognised & appreciated that we are like ordinary cracked & flawed containers but as we open & trust ourselves to the Lord, then through the Spirit God’s light & healing love, the life of Jesus is seen. (2 Corinthians 4:5-18)

**May we too follow our *Servant King*, learn how to serve & experience God’s life & love at work. MP 133 Father, I place into Your hands**