

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

ACTS 9:1-22

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.

Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”

Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias."

And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"

But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

If you enjoy eating nuts, you're not alone. I for one, *go nuts over nuts*. Some edible nuts come in their shells - *peanuts, and walnuts, and pistachios* come to mind.

But not macadamia nuts.

Macadamias are primarily grown in our 50th state of Hawaii. The nut itself is 80% oil, which accounts for its buttery texture. Its sweetness gives it a tropical taste.

But you rarely see a macadamia nut in its shell. It requires some serious muscle to extract a macadamia.

You don't just peel off the shell with your fingers.

It takes a nutcracker with 300 pounds of pressure per square inch to open a macadamia nut. Which earns for the macadamia, the notable title, “**toughest nut to crack.**”

And we could ascribe the same title to the man we find at the beginning of Acts 9. Verse 1 reads, “**Then Saul...**”

It is true that Jesus' resurrection was a life-changing event for many people - *followers and enemies alike.*

Think of the eleven disciples huddled in fear behind barricaded doors... When Jesus needed His men they were nowhere to be found. In the garden, in the face of the police force that arrested Jesus, they scattered like pigeons on a city street... A boastful Peter had denied His Lord in front of a campfire girl... Though only John mustered enough courage to accompany the women to place of execution, you can bet they all witnessed Jesus at a distance, hanging on the cross. They saw Him die, something they'd all vowed they would never let happen.

The Scripture says, “Peter went out and wept bitterly.” And he wasn’t the only grown man who cried that day.

And now they’re worried that they might be next...

Yet something happened to these men. For just a few weeks later they’re standing in the Temple before the same powerful crowd who’d arranged Jesus’ execution.

And they’re preaching boldly that *Jesus is Lord. He’s conquered death. Ascended to God. He’s on the throne in heaven, and He’ll return to judge all men everywhere.*

Something profound convinced the disciples of these truths. If they’d not seen the living Lord with their own eyes they would still be hiding in the shadows. Despite the threat to their own welfare and their ultimate loss of life, it was His *resurrection* that became their *motivation*.

There’s a verse in Acts 6 that if you’re reading through too quickly, you can overlook. Verse 7 speaks of life in the Early Church, “The word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” *The chief priests were the men who killed Jesus!*

Yet the empty tomb was such a compelling proof it won over the staunchest skeptics... Realize, to silence all the talk - to squelch *this Jesus movement* in its tracks, all His enemies had to do was produce His body.

But they couldn't, for Jesus had risen! It was an infallible proof that even the priests couldn't side-step.

And this became the anthem of the first Christians.

Men and women went out into a pagan world with nothing but faith... and God's Spirit... and a message...

This man Jesus had overcome death, and ascended into the clouds, and was now Lord of heaven and earth.

The Roman emperors claimed to be Lord - *and they weren't looking to clouds* - they had armies backing up their boasts. But these Christians stood strong in their faith. Against great odds, at enormous personal sacrifice, they carried their message to the ends of the earth.

And after four centuries were in the books, Rome had fallen, and Christianity was the religion of the empire!

One theologian sums it up, “Whenever we go back to the key texts for evidence of why the Church persisted in such an improbable and dangerous belief: *it is because Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead.*”

Certainly, the resurrection of Jesus changed the lives of many, many people living in the first century AD, *but Rabbi Saul was not one of them - at least, not at first.*

Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. Many believe he was present at the trial of Jesus. Perhaps his lips also cried out, “Crucify Him.”

At the time, Saul may’ve been new to Jerusalem, and not yet a fixture in the priestly hierarchy. But in the three years since, all that had changed... Saul was an religious go-getter. He had climbed the ladder and worked himself into a position of ecclesiastical clout.

In Acts 7, at the trial of Stephen, we’re told those who witnessed against Stephen laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. Acts 8:1 reads, “Now Saul was consenting to his death.” Implied is that he oversaw the trial and execution of the Church’s first martyr.

And after Stephen's stoning, Saul was more insistent than ever to stamp out the Christians and the message they preached. If Jesus was Lord, the Temple religion Saul studied and pursued all his life, was now in vain.

He could never let that happen. His goal was to protect the status quo. And this is why we're told in verse 1, "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..." The original language is vivid...

It describes Saul as a rabid animal stalking its prey.

Saul was so resistant to the message of Jesus He was determined to wipe out all who dared to proclaim it.

In fact, his rage went on the road. Verse 1, he "went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." In killing Stephen he'd hoped to stamp-out Christianity, but Saul had only blown the head off the dandelion. *He has now spread it seeds...*

Believers in Jerusalem have move up the road to Damascus, and started a church 140 miles northeast.

Notice though, how Acts 9 refers to Christianity. It's called "*the Way.*" Christianity isn't just a moral code, or a system of beliefs, or religious rites - it's *a way of life.*

The resurrection meant new life for Jesus, and new life for His followers. Different from the legalism and ritualism of religion - Christianity was a new way of relating to God and people that involved trust and love.

What we're going to read about in Acts 9 is Saul's conversion, but it began before his experience on the roadside. "*The Way*" had gotten under Saul's skin.

He admired what he saw in the Christians - their courage, and joy, and love, and sacrificial spirit - it was obvious they had the power of God - *but how could they deny their traditions and trust solely in this Jesus?*

Stephen had reminded the Jews that their God was bigger than Temple traditions. God had always done new things. He was doing something new with Jesus!

But this infuriated a conservative like Saul. He refused to let God be God, and change the rules. He hated everything Christian. Today, we'd label Saul's attack on Christians and Christianity "*a hate crime.*"

Several years ago, two Northeastern University professors did a study on hate crimes in America.

They concluded 60% of the perpetrators are thrill-seekers - insecure people just trying to be macho.

Another, 35% are turf defenders. They throw rocks at a house when a family of another race moves onto the block. They're just afraid of anything new or different.

But 5% of perpetrators have deliberately built a false theology to rationalize their prejudice. They think they're doing God a favor by persecuting the group they hate. These folks are the most violent and lethal.

And this describes Saul... Blaise Pascal once said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Saul was zealous for God, but his zeal was without knowledge.

It's easy to hate what you don't understand...

But that's about to change for Saul. This angry rabbi is about to make a new and surprising acquaintance...

Verse 3 tells us, “As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground...”

Some artists depict Saul on the back of a horse. The bright light literally knocked him out of his saddle.

Whether Saul was *on horseback* - or *on foot* - he was definitely riding on a proverbial, “high horse.” It was a long fall to the ground for a proud man like Saul.

He was headed to Damascus to *knock off* Christians, instead he is the one who now gets *knocked off*.

Verse 4, “And (he) heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” We’ll learn later that this voice was Jesus. But notice what Jesus doesn’t say, “*why are you persecuting My Church?*”

No, He says, “*why are you persecuting Me?*” Realize to attack His Church is to assault Jesus Himself.

You can’t pick on my wife without riling me up.

And likewise, you can’t hurt the Bride of Christ without upsetting Jesus. He takes it very personally.

Verse 5, “And (Saul) said, “Who are You, Lord?”

One of my favorite John Wayne movies is “**Big Jake.**”

In the final scene John Wayne, or Big Jake, wounds the bad guy. He’s just about to breathe his last, when he looks up at Wayne and asks feebly, “*Who are you?*”

John Wayne answers, “**Jacob McCandles.**” The villain is surprised. He replies, “*I thought you’z was dead!*” That’s when Big Jake answers, “**Not hardly!**”

And this how I hear this conversation in verse 5.

Saul thought Jesus was dead. But *Big Jesus* now knocks Saul off his high horse, and says, “*Not hardly!*”

“**Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** Jesus was a common name in the first century. That’s why it was usually qualified, or specified as “**Jesus of Nazareth.**” But here, Saul isn’t stupid...

He knows who this is! This is the Jesus He’s had issue with... This is the Jesus he’s been persecuting.

And Jesus says to Saul, “**It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**” Goads were sharp pokers used to maneuver cattle. We’d call them, “**cattle prodders.**”

Today, a cattle prodder is a pointed metal stick, or even a electrically charged wand used to prod cows.

And it's a great analogy of the Holy Spirit's conviction. Resist the Lord and He'll keep poking you...

Under the surface of your life - below the boil of your anger, and your outward hostility toward Him - God will keep poking, and prodding, and getting your attention.

He's relentless! He lets you know your life is not right. God has a claim on you and He won't let you go.

Saul was trying to *stamp out publicly* the very thing that was *haunting him privately*. Stephen's joy - his peace in the throes of death - the glory of God he radiated - was everything in life Saul wanted.

Yet Stephen had obtained it apart from Judaism.

Stephen's Savior was a man the Jews called a blasphemer. Yet Saul couldn't shake his testimony.

The Holy Spirit keeps prodding... *even on Easter!*

Usually, we think of Christianity's most *vocal critics* and *violent opponents* as **the hardest nuts to crack.**

Yet in reality, they may be closest to salvation.

If they didn't have any sense of God's conviction they would be ambivalent and apathetic, but like Saul their resistance is their way of kicking against the goads.

Verse 6 tells us Saul's reaction, "So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Here's proof of the genuineness of a man's conversion... the cry, "*what do you want me to do?*"

Too many people start out their Christian experience with the demand, "Lord, here's what I want You to do."

But not Saul. It took only a few seconds with the risen Christ for Saul to realize that in a relationship with Jesus, it's the Lord who calls the shots and not us.

In the presence of the Savior, Saul melts, he breaks.

A proud man now trembles! He has seen a light! Jesus is alive. He's met Him. And if Jesus rose from the dead, it means He's Lord of life - even Saul's life...

Are you fighting against God this morning?

You can't win! It's best you surrender.

And when Saul does, Jesus gives him his marching orders. “Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Once Saul gets into the city, he’ll be told the next step.

So often God’s will comes to us one step at a time. You don’t get the second step, until you obey the first.

“And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

God's revelation to Saul worked like a camera. As soon as the light hit the film the shutter closed, and it didn't reopen until the image had time to develop.

God blinded his new servant Saul. He gave him three days in the dark room so the memory of the light of Christ would be forever etched into his mind.

“Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

So the Lord *said* to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight...” Straight Street still exists in the modern city of Damascus. Its the main thoroughfare that cuts east to west through the city center.

“And (on this street) inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.”

Here's another proof of genuine conversion. When you meet Jesus you'll want to talk. You'll desire to pray.

The Lord continues His instructions to Ananias in verse 12, “And in a vision (Saul) has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” Ananias is reluctant! *And we can understand!*

This was like God calling a Syrian Christian today to pray for the Chief Imam of Isis. That's exactly how the Church at the time perceived Saul. He was a terrorist.

“But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

How interesting, that it was God who chose Saul, not vice versa. God chose him by His grace. And from the very beginning God had a mission in mind for Saul.

He would preach to Gentiles, and kings, and Jews.

Everything about Saul’s life had prepared him for his God-appointed mission. Even while screaming and kicking against Christianity, God had His hand on Saul.

The *persecutor* would eventually turn *preacher!*

A *Jewish rabbi* would be used to bring the Gospel to *the Gentiles*. God’s purposes for Saul would prevail.

And I don’t believe anything gets wasted in God’s plan for us. Your education, your experiences, your years in the street or on the job... even what you felt at the time to be unnecessary, *perhaps painful*, somehow gets redeemed in God’s amazing plan for our lives.

Saul was born a Jew, yet raised in a Gentile city. He learned Hebrew *and* Greek. He was a Roman citizen *and* a Jewish rabbi. He was equally familiar with Greek culture, and Roman law, and Hebrew theology.

He knew how to make tents, yet was academically schooled under the great rabbi *Gamaliel*. Saul could move easily among Gentiles and Jews - pagans and priests - princes and paupers - scholars and scrubbers.

Saul was chosen and prepared in unusual ways.

And the greatest irony was that *the chief persecutor of Christians will be the most persecuted of Christians.*

Ananias tells Saul that before his life is over he'll suffer much for Jesus' sake. God's hand was on Saul long before he realized who it was he would call Lord.

Verse 17 tells us what happened when Ananias arrived, "And (he) went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul..."

What a tender token of God's grace - how encouraging for Saul to hear Ananias say, "*Brother Saul.*" His acceptance affirmed the Lord's forgiveness.

And this is what our fellowship with one another does for us. When we treat each other as brothers and sisters, our fellowship solidifies our identity in Christ.

Ananias then tells him, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And no sooner had Ananias said it, we’re told in verse 18, “Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.”

Verse 19, “So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?”

Like a macadamia the toughest nut had been cracked! The Lord Jesus had applied his 300 pounds of pressure per square inch, and what was a *hard, crusty, stoney sinner* was not a *sweet and tasty saint*.

It’s interesting, for the rest of his life, this is how *Saul*, who later was renamed *Paul*, thought of himself...

In 1 Timothy 1:13 Paul records his testimony, “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent (or disrespectful) man: but I obtained mercy... The grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus... For this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.” God set a precedent in choosing Saul!

Literally, it was as if God reached His hand down into a bowl of human nuts, and deliberately picked out the one with the hardest shell - *a macadamia no less*.

He cracked it open with His fingers, and laughed out loud, “If I can crack *this nut*, then I can crack *any nut!*”

It reminds me of Joshua Blahyi, a former Liberian warlord, who once ruled the streets of Monrovia. Blahyi came to power in the Liberian Civil War. He recruited orphaned children from the streets to serve in his army.

It's estimated that Blahyi is responsible for 20,000 deaths. His killing spree and tortures were horrendous.

Blahyi would go into battle naked. He wore nothing but tennis shoes and carried a machete. Thus, his nickname, “General Butt Naked.” He would cut his prisoners in pieces and eat their heart from their chest.

His acts were demon-fueled. Prior to battle he'd offer to the local idols a child sacrifice to insure protection.

But the story of General Butt Naked took an unexpected turn in April 1996. A group of pastors decided to take action against the terror in their city.

They did all they knew to do, they started sharing the Good News of Jesus. One of the pastors, Bishop John Kun Kun, was chosen to speak to the violent General.

I imagine, his reaction was the same as Ananias!

Kun Kun went to his Monrovia compound, knocked on the door, and asked to speak to Blahyi. During their first interview, the Bishop says the man spent the entire time cleaning and reassembling a submachine gun.

Kun Kun's message though was simple. He said to the madman, "All I wanted to tell you is that Jesus loves you, and that He has a better plan for your life."

Blahyi said nothing. After praying for General Butt Naked, the pastor left. Later, Blahyi shot his bodyguard in the knees for allowing the pastor in to see him.

But Bishop John Kun Kun returned again and again.

Blahyi started to talk. The Bishop learned that he was a man filled with fear. Blahyi believed he was demon possessed and wanted a way out. And “a way out” was the one thing the Bishop could offer him.

Together they prayed and General Butt Naked was clothed in the righteousness of the risen Lord Jesus.

Today, like Saul, Blahyi has become a preacher of the Gospel. He says if he’s ever sentenced to prison or death he’ll accept his punishment. In the meantime he’s returning to his victims and asking for forgiveness.

I read of his conversion in the German magazine, Der Spiegel. It quotes one of his favorite verses, John 3:18, “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned...”

The author adds, “Blahyi has found perhaps the only religion that can forgive him for committing murder thousands of times, forgive him completely and still recognize the greatness of its God in this act of forgiveness.” Christianity is the only religion that glories in God’s greatness through His willingness to pardon. God’s greatness *and grace* makes Him so amazing!

The article ends with a quote from Kun Kun, “God has the power to change anyone, even Butt Naked.”

Why does Christianity have this kind of power? Why is there no one beyond the reach of God's grace?

It's because God's love is found NOT in a creed, or in a ritual, or in a set of rules, *but in person* - a person who is alive and still shines His light into dark places.

We have a living Savior named Jesus.

Recently, I taught a class at the CC Bible College in California and I had a student named Mohammed.

I'm sure you can guess Mohammed was a former muslim. A number of years ago he immigrated from the Middle East to Southern California. But life in new surroundings didn't work out so well for Mohammed.

He started using drugs and became depressed.

One day he decided to end his life, so he drove to a bridge near the ocean. His plan was to drive over the guardrail and end it all. As he drove, he started crying out to God. He called on the god he knew, Allah, and the Prophet Mohammed.

But there was no answer...

Finally, he heard another voice - a different voice than he'd ever heard before. It said, "Why don't you call on me to save you?" He asked, "Who are you?"

The voice answered back, "My name is Jesus."

My friend, Mohammed, said he was stunned. Never in a million years did he expect Jesus to speak to him.

Somehow he turned his car around and headed home. The next day, when he awoke, things seemed different. The sky was brighter. His head was clearer.

He said later in the day he was walking across a parking lot when he noticed a fellow sitting on the tailgate of his pick-up. The guy motioned for him to come over. Mohammed told me in his culture when a man gets your attention it's because he knows you.

But this guy was a complete stranger. He said to Mohammed, "I just felt God wanted me to tell you that Jesus Christ loves you and He cares about you."

Mohammed was floored. *Jesus was talking to him?*

Later, the same guy called Mohammed and invited him to Calvary Chapel. Mohammed told the guy he was muslim. He couldn't go to a church. But the guy asked him, "Well, will you meet me in the parking lot?"

For some strange reason Mohammed agreed.

When he got there, Mohammed asked him if this was a church that believe there's only one way to God.

That Jesus is the only way? The man answered him, “Well, that's what Jesus said. He told us, He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Mohammed got angry. He couldn't attend such a closed-minded church. He left.

At the time he was working the cash register at a store. It was later that day, someone handed him a roll of bills. Mohammed said he was unfolding them, and putting them into the register, when he noticed one of the bills with *an ichthus, a fish, a Christian symbol.*

It was drawn on the bill, around the word “Jesus.”

But when Mohammed turned the bill over, someone else had written, “John 14:6. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Mohammed said that was all the proof He needed. It was then He put His faith in Jesus.

Just like Saul, the voice that spoke to Him, became His Savior. Mohammed surrendered his life to Jesus!

And over the years I've heard story after similar story. Today, when I share the Gospel and point folks to Jesus I do so with confidence. I'm not selling pie in the sky, or mental gymnastics, or mere pleasant thoughts.

I know there's a risen Lord on the other end of the line, who's prodding and poking - and convicting and speaking in His own way - *but in a way that's clear.*

And He's powerful! **Jesus conquered the grave.** Now there's no foe He can't defeat. No sin He can't forgive. No vice He can't slay. No heart He can't change.

Jesus is alive! And His heart still beats with love for the man or woman, the boy or girl, who has yet to soften and surrender to His will... *Jesus loves to crack nuts!* And often, *He picks the toughest nuts to crack!*

If He's picking you today, don't ignore Him. I hope you'll answer, *"Lord, what do you want me to do?"*