

MONDAY 11 July 2022 "Fresh Start" (Acts 9:19-22)

Good Monday morning to you my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

There's something special about **'fresh starts'** isn't there? You've experienced them... your first day on a new job; the day after graduation; the first morning you awaken with a spouse next to you, the day after your marriage; and the first day you awaken to your baby's cry. Yes, we must also acknowledge the extremely painful first day you wake up without your dear loved one who passed into eternity the day before. **"Fresh starts" are important days and today let's look at one of the most significant of all time.**

I left you yesterday in the great city of Damascus, Syria, in the year 35ad, a little less than 2000 years ago. We witnessed a shocking, amazing miracle yesterday. The Jewish Pharisee Saul of Tarsus was blinded by a lightning bolt in broad daylight as he traveled, with some companions, to Damascus *on a mission of eradication*. They were angry, determined, and had letters of authority giving them permission to do almost anything to any Jewish person they found who had become a follower of Jesus, anything, that is, which might convince that person to renounce Jesus or suffer the dire consequences. But on that road, the lightning bolt blinded Saul and a voice from heaven challenged Saul to consider the error of his ways. The voice said: **"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Now go into the city and you will be told what you must do."** (Acts 9:6) And so Saul and his companions went into Damascus and waited. Three days later Ananias, a Jewish follower of Jesus, risked his life, and everything, by obeying a vision he had in which Jesus had instructed Ananias to find Saul and give him God's message, and participate in Saul's healing! Yesterday we looked at how risky that was for Ananias to obey that vision. *He did, and in Saul's three days of blindness Saul had become convinced Jesus was in fact the Jewish Messiah; and Saul put his full trust in Jesus as his Savior and Messiah; and Saul asked Ananias to baptize him in the name of Jesus Christ!* Ananias had done so, experiencing one of the greatest miracles imaginable... **the total transformation of a man passionately opposed to Jesus, into a man passionately pursuing knowing Jesus personally and determined to now promote Jesus as Messiah to any Jew who would hear him!** Few words can explain what a dramatic transformation has taken place in Saul! *It was time now for Saul's "FRESH START" as a new man!*

The record says: **"...after taking some food, Saul regained his strength."** (Acts 9:19) Luke tells us the first thing Saul did after his baptism was eat! He had been fasting and praying for three days while blind. That meal helped him regain his strength. What Luke doesn't tell us is what was said during that meal. I presume it was Saul, and his traveling companions and Ananias at the table, and can't you imagine the questions back and forth among these men?

Saul was among the most educated men alive at that time, particularly in the history of Israel and the Jewish holy books... the Scriptures and all the writings of the Rabbi's and other Jewish scholars, all the way back to the days of Moses.

But in those three days of blindness, Saul was in school... and the Holy Spirit of God was his professor, as Saul thought deeply on all he had learned about the long-awaited Messiah. It was the Holy Spirit who convinced Saul that Jesus was in fact that Messiah, and further, as Saul proclaimed, that Jesus was God the Son! Now, around the table, Saul poured out what the Holy Spirit had taught him, and Ananias explained what he had experienced as a follower of Jesus. I can see Saul's companions with their heads bouncing back and forth watching the discussion between Saul and Ananias. I presume they ended that meal with prayer, thanking Jesus for what He was doing in Saul and Ananias, and also Saul's traveling companions. *None of them would ever be the same men after this day!*

The record says: ***"Saul spent several days with the followers of Jesus in Damascus. At once he began to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God! All those who heard Saul were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on the name of Jesus? And hasn't Saul come here to Damascus to take as prisoners any followers of Jesus, and take them to the chief priests?' Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by PROVING that Jesus is the Messiah."*** (Acts 9:19-22)

It appears Saul made a plan that night, and *the next day, his 'fresh start' day, he headed straight for the Jewish Synagogues in Damascus.* That would be the place he would feel most comfortable, for it was the place the Jewish holy books were read and discussed. It was the place of prayer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was the place the Damascus Rabbi was having school, instructing the Jewish boys, all the things Saul had learned as a boy. Look, Saul is entering now. All the boys stand immediately out of respect. The Rabbi doesn't recognize Saul, they've never met, so he asks Saul who he is. Paul would have responded, *'I am Saul Paulus of Tarsus, a Pharisee from Jerusalem, a member of the Sanhedrin.'* The Rabbi's eyes would have widened, his mouth opened and perhaps he would have bowed out of reverence and with a swipe of his arm offered the teaching lectern to Saul. What remarkable privilege for his students to receive some teaching from such a wise, learned, Jewish scholar of such authority! Perhaps the Rabbi was one of those Damascus leaders who had received word that Saul was coming, and he was both prepared and excited to work closely with Saul in identifying and dealing appropriately with those who had formerly been part of his Synagogue congregation but had defected and were now reportedly followers of this Jesus.

Perhaps Saul said something like this: *'Good morning young boys. Oh, I am delighted to see you here, exactly where you should be, with your ears and hearts open listening to this wise Rabbi teach you the most important wisdom in the world... the wisdom of the God of our people, the Hebrews. I too sat in the Synagogue of my town, Tarsus, when I was a young boy like you. Oh how I love our Torah and other sacred Scriptures. I devoured every word our Rabbi taught me. In fact, when I was still a young man I moved to Jerusalem to learn from Rabbi Gamaliel and others among the wisest men of our time.'*

*It has been the honor of my life to study and learn and now become a Pharisee, even a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. But in the past few days I have had an experience that has changed my life. God Himself met me on the road which I was traveling, coming here to Damascus from Jerusalem. A lightning flash knocked me off my horse, and a voice from heaven spoke to me. When I got up from the ground, I was blind, unable to see. These men were traveling with me, and they led me here to Damascus. For three days I remained blind. I fasted and prayed, and God spoke to me. God instructed me. God taught me many things I did not understand from my studies with Gamaliel. God restored my sight, and I now understand something profound. We Jews have been waiting, since the days of Moses, for the coming of God's Anointed one, our Messiah. God has shown me that we need wait no longer, for our Messiah has come! He was among us in Jerusalem. I saw Him speak, I heard of miracles He had done, but we did not recognize Him, and we killed Him by crucifying Him! But God raised Him from the dead! He appeared to many of His friends and disciples and now He has appeared to ME also. His name. . . Jesus of Nazareth! **Yes, this Jesus whom I came here to oppose is in fact the Messiah I have waited for all my life!!***

Now friends, we have no record that Saul said those specific words that first day, but we do have record of many times that Saul spoke that truth to many audiences *as he spent the rest of his life proclaiming Jesus*. We also know Saul always started in the Synagogue of any new town to which he had come. He would always be welcome there, for he was becoming somewhat famous as a Pharisee. Now let me ask you... how do you suppose the Rabbi and these young boys reacted in the Synagogue that day, as *Paul was making his "Fresh Start" proclaiming, for the first time, that he was convinced that Jesus... yes, the Jesus Paul had been totally opposed to, was in fact the Jewish Messiah!?* The Rabbi, of course, was stunned, confused. What should he do? These were his students; he was responsible to be sure they were only taught God's Jewish truth. He felt God would hold him accountable if he allowed those students to hear or believe any heresy, anything contrary to the very clear Word of God. But this was the great, the respected, the honorable Pharisee Saul of Tarsus. He was much more a scholar than the Rabbi, but what Saul was saying was not right!

For a brief moment which must have seemed like hours, the Rabbi was in turmoil trying to understand what Saul was doing, contaminating the minds of his young students with such radical teaching which was totally opposed to what Saul had come here to Damascus to accomplish! Let's pause right here. What would you have done if you were the Rabbi on this Saul's "Fresh Start" day? I want to leave you deeply pondering this question: *whatever you hear, day or night, by any means of communication... how do you know if it's God's TRUTH and what do you do if it isn't?* Now think about that my friends, and tomorrow I'll meet you back here in this Synagogue...

Today's Scripture is Acts 9:19-22.