

WEDNESDAY 13 July 2022 "Perceptions" (Acts 9:26-30)

Hello my 'Walking with Jesus' friends,

*How do you respond when you first meet someone you've heard a lot of negative things about? Or have you ever been in the situation when, as you were meeting someone for the first time you discover they already have some preconceived wrong ideas about you, based on some incorrect rumors they have heard about you? **Perceptions are hard to change aren't they, and they can really set us up for conflict, right?***

Let's rejoin Saul and his traveling companions on the road from Damascus, Syria back to Jerusalem, about 2000 years ago. *This Saul is entirely different from the man, by the same name, who was on this very same road going the opposite direction only a few weeks before.* What changed, you ask? Well, a powerful encounter with God which included a mid-day lightning bolt which knocked Saul off his horse and blinded him; a voice from heaven claiming to be the risen Jesus Christ; three days fasting and praying while he was blind; and the Holy Spirit of God teaching Saul the truth about Jesus, during those three days. Oh, and also, an encounter with a Jewish Jesus follower named Ananias who came and gave Saul a powerful and probably painful message from God, and prayed for Saul's sight to be restored, which it was, and then Saul was baptized by Ananias! *Wow, no wonder this Saul is a totally different man than he was only a few weeks ago on this same Damascus Road!*

By the way the message Ananias gave to Saul was penetrating deeply into Saul's soul as he and his companions traveled back to Jerusalem. The message had become reality in the angry, aggressive response Saul had experienced when word got out in Damascus about Saul's experience, his trust in Jesus to be his Savior, his baptism, and now his bold declaring that he was convinced Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and his Savior and his Lord! The message from Ananias to Saul was that God had said: **"This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him [Saul] how much he must suffer for My name."** (Acts 9:15,16) Two very significant words leap out of that statement and I'm sure penetrated very, very deeply into Saul's heart. . . **"GENTILES"** and **"SUFFER"!!**

Gentiles...oh my! *In Saul's mind and heart Gentiles were worthless human beings.* In his years of theological training Saul was convinced God had no place in His plan for humanity and certainly not in His kingdom for **Gentiles!** God had made it very clear His chosen people were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's 12 sons. Anyone else, outside of that pure Hebrew bloodline were, in Saul's understanding, based on all his years of study and memorization of Scripture, people of very little value to God. Can you imagine, therefore, the heart burn, the brain strain, the anxiety it caused Saul to hear those words from Ananias and then try to filter those words through his many years of teaching and training in the Jewish holy books? **Gentiles...** *how could it ever be that God would accept Gentiles to be counted among His people? Surely when Jesus died His atonement death, He had not died for Gentiles!?*

And so, Saul was determined to figure it out. Saul asked the Holy Spirit to open his mind to understand a concept that was simply anathema to him, absolutely antithetical to everything he believed, IF this concept was truly from God. You see my friends, Saul wanted to get it right. He now understood that he had been so wrong about Jesus as Messiah and in his passion, he had hurt many people, including, standing as the overseer of the stoning execution of Stephen. *Saul didn't want to be wrong anymore, about anything that was important to God, and so Saul prayed, and meditated, and studied, and opened his mind to clear, fresh teaching from the Holy Spirit of God... even if it was contrary to all he had previously studied!*

But the other powerful and painful word was "**SUFFER**". No one likes that word, anywhere in the world, right? In fact from the time we were children we learn to do whatever we have to do so we don't '**suffer**'. But as Saul reflected on Ananias' words, it seemed as though God could already foresee that Saul would endure much opposition and, in that opposition, would be things which would cause Saul great suffering. Now that left Saul in a quandary! *If God had called Saul to this new life, and God was commissioning Saul to take His message even to Gentiles and their kings, then wouldn't it seem logical that God would protect Saul, and provide for Saul, and even bless Saul if Saul was obedient and faithful to his calling from God?* Isn't that what so many of the Old Testament Scriptures promised God's people? Have you found yourself wrestling with God about concepts like this my friends?

So, what does the record tell us Saul experienced when he and his companions arrived in Jerusalem, having come from Damascus? ***"When Saul came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the followers of Jesus, but they were all afraid of him, not believing he really had become a follower of Jesus. But Barnabas took Saul to the apostles. Barnabas told them how Saul on his journey to Damascus had seen the Lord and that Jesus had spoken to him, and how in Damascus Saul had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of Jesus. He talked and debated with the Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the followers of Jesus heard about this, they took Saul down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus."*** (Acts 9:26-30)

Barnabas! Remember him? Barnabas is the Levite follower of Jesus who was also called "the son of encouragement" and he had sold a piece of land and brought the proceeds to the apostles to help widows and others in need? (Acts 4:36) Tell me my friends, *have you ever needed a "Barnabas"?* Someone who believed in you, someone who didn't believe the rumors about you. Someone who was willing to risk their own reputation to build a friendship with you and help you? Barnabas was evidently a man of wisdom and great discernment. We can presume the Holy Spirit of God helped Barnabas understand the truth about Saul, when Peter and John and the rest of the apostles simply weren't willing to consider that maybe, just maybe his transformation was true!? Maybe Saul really did have a life changing encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus?! Could it be?

Praise God for Barnabas and all people like him today who are the peacemakers, the bridgebuilders. People who are willing to take a risk as God leads them out on the thin ice of the perceptions of people. Are you one of those rare and very valuable people in our world, my friend?

How long did it take for the apostles to trust Saul? How many schemes and plans were made by the Pharisees, the High Priest and other Jewish leaders trying to kill Saul? How was Jesus working, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to protect Saul? *How long before finally the apostles and Saul agreed that for the good of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem, and for Saul's safety, it would be better if Saul went away?* Can you imagine the discussions with Saul and the apostles? *'Where, Saul, where would be the safest place for you to go for a while, to let things settle down here in Jerusalem, and give you time to meet with God to really sort all this out?'*

' Well, I haven't been home to Tarsus in many years. Perhaps there I could have the peace and quiet I need to really hear from God and discern what Jesus wants for the rest of my new life? Yes, Tarsus, I'll go to Caesarea on the coast and board the first available ship to Tarsus. I don't know when I'll see you all again, but I'll be praying for you, and I'll come back as soon as the Holy Spirit directs me back. Meanwhile I think I have many new things to understand as the Spirit of God will teach me!'

And so off Saul went to the coastal port of Caesarea, and then back home to his hometown of Tarsus. Oh, he had so much to learn from God about this new life in Jesus. Over the next few weeks, we'll follow Saul's journey. *As you may know this man eventually wrote 13 books of the New Testament in our Bible!* So, my friends, all of you around the world, I wonder what God is wanting to accomplish as He teaches you and me His great, life changing truths? Are we willing to learn? Here's a simple song to help us consider our readiness for God to teach us His ways:

Today's Scripture is Acts 9:26-30.