

ACTS 22.3-16: THIS IS MY STORY

[Chelmsford 12 May 2013]

CHAOS ON DAMASCUS ROAD - Did Aliens Cause Multi-Chariot Pile-Up?

So begins an imaginary tabloid account of Paul's conversion

Road networks around Israel were thrown into chaos yesterday as chariots were caught up in a pile-up on one of the country's busiest highways. The Damascus Road was closed for several hours as the emergency services tried to clear the wreckage.

'People were simply driving too fast', said one traffic policemen. 'When they had to stop quickly they just couldn't. There were bits of horse and camel everywhere'.

According to police information, the chaos was caused by a white horse stopping suddenly in the fast lane. This caused the camel behind it to jack-knife and shed its load, blocking the carriage way.

A police spokesman revealed the driver of the white horse had apparently had 'a kind of vision'. 'He claims to have been blinded by lights', reported one police spokesman. 'However, we have ascertained that there were no vehicles coming in the opposite direction at the time: certainly none with their headlamps on'.

Eyewitnesses, however, reported seeing a bright light and hearing some kind of voice. 'It was obviously a close encounter', said a spokesman for the UFO institute in Jerusalem. 'There is quite clearly some kind of government cover-up going on. They don't want us to know the truth'

Police spokesman refused to confirm or deny that a senior member of the anti-cult taskforce had been breathalysed and released on bail.

Written by Nick Page, a teenage buddy of mine, this account is clearly nonsense.

But it is no more nonsensical than some of the explanations given for Paul's encounter of the Risen Jesus on the Damascus Road

- Paul had an epileptic fit, was one explanation – it was a '*discharging of the occipital cortex*'
- Others, noting that this encounter took place "**about midday**" (22.8) have suggested that Paul had been out in the sun too long - and as a result experienced a bad bout of sunstroke
- Yet another suggestion is that Paul was hit by a flash of lightning – "*That very region had one characteristic phenomenon. When the hot air of the plain met the cold air of the mountain range, violent electrical storms resulted. Just at that moment there came such a lightning storm, and out of the storm Christ spoke to Paul*"

These and other explanations are but speculations – and no more. Precisely what happened, nobody knows.

According to Paul, “**about midday a bright light from the sky flashed suddenly around me**” (22.6). The men with Paul were aware of the light.
But Paul alone was overcome by the experience
Paul alone was left blinded by the experience.

Paul alone too heard a voice saying: “**I am Jesus of Nazareth, who you persecute**”
To his amazement he met with the Risen Lord Jesus, and as a result he became a changed man.

Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, has written: “*We call this event a ‘conversion’, but it was more like a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together*”.
What an amazing conversion experience it must have been

1. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO DECIDE TO FOLLOW JESUS

If ever a person had a dramatic conversion, it was Paul:

- One day he was persecuting the Christians, shutting them up in prison, voting for their death sentences
- The next week he was preaching the Good News, declaring Jesus to be “**the Son of God**” (Acts 9.20).

It was an incredible change - and I use the word ‘incredible’ advisedly.

As far as the first Christians were concerned, it was all a bit too much to believe.

So when God called Ananias, a leader in the young church of Antioch, to visit Paul, Ananias at first refused - “*Lord, you've got it wrong - this man has been our chief enemy*” (see Acts 9.13).

Ananias, found it extraordinarily difficult to believe that Paul, the arch persecutor of the infant church, could really have changed.

It was an amazing conversion.

Neither of the two young people being baptized this morning have such a dramatic conversion story to tell.

Neither Ben nor Brooke have seen flashing lights or heard heavenly voices.

Neither of them have had their lives so totally turned upside down.

And yet they do have a story to tell – a story of how they decided to follow Jesus.

And do note, that even religious people like Paul need to decide to follow Jesus

Paul at the time of his conversion belonged to a crack spiritual outfit called the party of the Pharisees. He really did his best to please God.

So much so, that he kidded himself that he was perfect – as he told the church at Philippi, as far as he was concerned he was “**without fault**” (Phil 3.26)..

But the turning point came when he realized that he could never be good enough for God: as he later wrote to the church in Rome: “**everyone has sinned**” (Rom 3.23).

In the light of God’s perfection, even our best looks pretty awful.

It’s like the windows in our homes: in the half-gloom of winter they may look fine, but now when Spring has come and when the sun is shining brightly, all of a sudden we become aware that they are grimy and dirty.

Only Jesus can deal with our sin – only Jesus can put us right with God.

So all of us need to decide to follow Jesus

- to change from living for self to living for Jesus
- to change from trusting in ourselves and in what we can achieve to trusting Jesus and in what he has achieved for us.

The precise nature of the conversion experience is unimportant.

What is important is that we realise our need and do something about it.

2. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO BELIEVE IN JESUS

Yes, we all need to believe that Jesus died for us and rose for us.

There is a fascinating passage in 1 Cor 15 where Paul quotes a snippet from an early Christian creed which he may well have been taught by Ananias before he was baptised: **"I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; that he appeared to Peter and then to all twelve apostles"** (1 Cor 15.3-5)

This creed centres around two affirmations about Jesus:

1. Christ died for our sins as written in the Scriptures

The death of Jesus was no unfortunate accident.

It was no untimely end to the career of an aspiring Jewish leader.

Rather, it was part and parcel of God's purposes, as evidenced in the writings of the OT prophets.

What's more, when Jesus died, he died **"for our sins"**.

This was no ordinary death. For when Jesus died, he died to deal with our sin, and with the consequences of our sin. In the words of the old hymn:

*He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by his precious blood*

Christian believing centres on a Cross.

The heart of Christian believing is the conviction that **"Christ died for our sins"**.

Paul took this step of Christian believing when he made the Christian faith his own when he declared **"the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me"** (Gal 2.20).

We too need to do the same – to put our trust in the Jesus who died for us.

2. Christ was raised to life three days later as written in the Scriptures

Paul believed in the Risen Lord. How could he do anything else?
For there on the Damascus Road he had met with the Risen Lord Jesus.
He had always believed in Jesus - or rather, he had always believed that Jesus was dead and buried. But then he discovered that the Crucified was alive!

I.e. Christian believing centres on an empty Cross.
The heart of Christian believing is the conviction that Jesus **was raised to life on the third day**, and is alive for evermore.

I find it interesting that when Paul had to defend himself before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem, he gave his testimony. He told his story of how he had encountered the living Lord Jesus. Were his hearers surprised, if not uncomfortable?
They expected a legal argument/battle of words - but Paul put an end to their words.

I believe that the Christian faith is intellectually defensible.
I am prepared to argue with anyone.
The facts of the resurrection are impressive - the onus of proof is on those who deny.
But the one unanswerable argument is the fact of human experience.

Almost certainly the most impressive element in this morning's service will not be the sermon, but rather the brief testimonies of these two as they tell their story – as they speak of how they came to put their trust in Jesus, who died and rose for them.
We/you too need to do the same!

3. LIKE PAUL WE NEED TO SEAL OUR COMMITMENT IN BAPTISM

When exactly did Paul become a Christian?
Did he give his life over to the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road?
I doubt it: a blind man, stumbling along with the help of friends, is hardly a picture of a man who has entered into newness of life.
That encounter with Jesus had to be assimilated.
Paul had experienced Jesus - but intellectually and theologically he had to collect his wits.

According to Luke's account in Acts 9, Paul's temporary blindness lasted 3 days.
It only came to an end after Ananias had prayed with him "**at once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again**" (9.18).
As Ananias talked and explained to Paul the rationale of what had happened to him, the penny gradually dropped, with the result that as Ananias prayed, his eyes - both literally and metaphorically - were opened!
Yes, it does sometimes take time to work out our faith – an Alpha course, for instance, lasts ten weeks.

And then what? Ananias told him to get baptised
"And now why wait any longer? Get up and be baptized, and have your sins washed

away by praying to him" (22.16)

Baptism is the natural way of responding to Jesus - indeed, it is the way Jesus laid down for all his disciples.

It was the natural step of obedience for Paul to take – it should also be a natural step of obedience for us to take too.

Do notice that Ananias says three things in particular:

- **"Be baptized"**, literally **"get yourself baptised"**. The onus was on Paul - he had to ask for baptism. Likewise these two have had to ask for baptism. As a church we believe in believers baptism - nobody is baptized because of their parents or friends
- **"Have your sins washed away by praying to Jesus[literallyhim]"**. Here we learn that baptism is a symbol of cleansing we receive through our faith in the Lord Jesus.
For water in itself doesn't cleanse
 - Pilate washed his hands in vain after delivering Jesus to be crucified.
 - Lady Macbeth washed her hands in vain after the murder of Duncan.Sin can't be expunged with water, not even with the water contained in the baptistery. Sin can only be expunged and lives can only be cleansed as we **"pray"** to Jesus – when we call out to Jesus to be saved.
As the apostle John wrote in his letter: **"the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin"** (1 Jn 1.7). Cleansing only comes as we pray and put our trust in the Lord who died that we might be forgiven
- **And now why wait any longer?** I.e. don't delay getting baptised. Once you are convinced that Jesus died and rose for you, then baptism is the next step. Baptism is the moment when we give ourselves publicly to Jesus – it is the moment when we seal our commitment to him. It is the end of the beginning of our Christian journey.

Yes, Paul sealed his commitment to Jesus in baptism
And shortly Ben and Brooke will do the same.

But enough of Paul – indeed, enough of Ben and Brooke.

My concern is for you, the members of the congregation: Where do YOU stand in all this?

The good news of the Christian message =

- when Jesus died on the Cross, he died for you that you might be forgiven;
- when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose that you too might share in his life.

But this only becomes good news when we put our trust in Jesus and decide to follow him.

Let me draw a somewhat trivial comparison.

Most Saturday nights somebody hits the jackpot in the National Lottery.

Millions of £s suddenly become theirs.

But in fact the prize only becomes theirs as they claim it.

For heaven's – for eternity's sake – take the step of faith and claim the prize that God in his love offers you. And then you too will have a story to share.