



DEVOTIONAL TIME

12-01-2014 @ 0900

“Is It ‘For God’, or For You?”

Acts 9:1-4



JOY TO THE WORLD!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven... and Heaven and nature sing!

Acts 1:1-4

“In the meantime, Saul kept up his violent threats of murder against the followers of the Lord. He went to the High Priest and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he should find there any followers of the Way of the Lord, he would be able to arrest them, both men and women, and bring them back to Jerusalem. As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground, and heard a Voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute Me?’”

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Do you show the grace, mercy and love of God in all of your dealings, to include those dealings with “religious” people who may not think exactly like you?
- Have you ever committed character assassination against a fellow believer because you thought they were going off in the wrong direction, (or at least not *your* direction)?
- What was it like to “wake up”, realizing God’s Love for those with whom you disagreed? Did it change the way you thought of them?... of God?... of yourself?

This passage presents a challenge to any thoughtful Christian: “How many times have I myself been a persecutor of Jesus Christ? How many times have I been utterly certain of my own rightness in the affairs of the Church? How many times have I literally ‘had Pastor Wright for lunch’, or had Brother Smith ‘kicked to the curb’, or Sister Jones ‘laid out in lavender’?” How easy it is to decide what is right, how it should be done, who should do it, and what it should look like when it is done, largely on the basis of limited experience(s) and narrow comfort zone(s). Any deviation from “THE WAY” to do things in the community, and “the posse” goes into action as judge and jury, calling out friends or anyone who will listen together. Like Saul, these “true believers” round up the “deviants & heretics”, put them on trial, convict them, and execute judgment of them on the spot. When “disciples” do such things, do they “act for God” and represent Him well, or engage in “knee-jerk reaction” on the basis of human understanding? Does this display human fear, arrogance, and vanity? Ought not real “true believers” display God’s Love instead? Note how Jesus Christ, (and later Stephen,) put God’s Love on display when they both prayed for the forgiveness of those who were killing them. When we are busy attacking or assassinating those we don’t agree with, what kind of testimony have we given the world? Saul thought he was doing “God’s Work”, and protecting “God’s Way”. God disagreed... and arranged a “close encounter of the God kind”. In this encounter, note how God identifies with those who are “His Own”! When it comes to judging the true state of another’s soul, God (and God alone!) has the insight, understanding, and authority to call another to account. Our job is to bring Good News to the world, sharing it with the very Love we have been given by a gracious and loving God, (who’s forgiven us more than we’d like to admit.) God, grant us the Grace of Soul-Winning Witness! Let Your Love warm our hearts! As Your Truth enlightens our minds, may we testify to the Gospel of Your Son with an attractive and gentle spirit! Let such evangelism draw more and more of Your children to Your Reign, and invite them to go “all in” for Jesus Christ, who’s gone “all-out” for us all!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

12-02-2014 @ 0900

“Do You Really Know Your Lord?”

Acts 9:5-9



JOY TO THE WORLD!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven... and Heaven and nature sing!

Acts 9:5-9

“Who are you, Lord?” he asked. “I am Jesus, whom you persecute!” the Voice said. “But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do.” The men who were traveling with Saul had stopped, not saying a word; they heard the Voice, but could not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but could not see a thing! So they took him by the hand, and led him into Damascus. For three days, he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything.

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Have you ever been acquainted with someone, (family, friend, neighbor, employer, etc.), possibly for many years, and “discover” suddenly a “hidden depth” you had never noticed?
- Have you ever embraced a “cause”, accepted a “mission”, or taken on a “project”, utterly certain you were “in the right”, only to learn later you were “backing the wrong side”?
- If you were to experience a genuine “come-to-Jesus” Moment, what do you think He’d say to you? What might He ask of you? Would you be ready to be “led” in His Direction?

It’s Advent already! Christmas is only 24 days away! This “Period of Preparation” may hold many challenges for us: we need to reflect on what it really means, then use it to good advantage, so the real meaning of Christmas will penetrate the clatter, push aside the clutter, and help us hear anew the Voice of the One whose Birth we celebrate! Stores are stacked with “fabulous” gifts, offered at “low, Low, LOW” prices. There are parties galore, with all sorts of treats and refreshments. There are travel plans to make, or guest rooms to prepare. In the middle of all this, where do we make time to “be still”, so we can “listen” to the original “Christmas Gift”? He came from the heights of Heaven with nothing but Himself...no golden harps, no linen robes, no trappings of Heavenly Glory. Soooo, how do we recognize Him? If we get caught in the whirlwind of activities, we may even miss Christ, the Lord! Like Saul in this passage, we can miss the meaning of Jesus, “the Reason for the Season”! The young Pharisee from Tarsus thought he “knew God,” and believed himself a true “servant of the Holy One of Israel”... God! He saw himself as a “zealous defender” of the Law of his Lord, entrusted with a mission to eliminate this “New Way” with every means possible. He knew well the tradition(s) he had studied, the Commandments of God in the Law, and the parables and lessons in the Talmud. How similar we are to Saul; we know the Jesus we celebrate in Church, and study in Sunday School! We hear His Teachings preached Sunday after Sunday. We’ve heard of “the Baby Jesus in the manger”, and seen “the Nativity” depicted in the church plays & Christmas pageants time after time. But if we were to meet Him suddenly, face to face, as we were “going about our business”, would we also be found saying “Who are you, Lord?” God, grant us the Grace of True Vision! Help us hear the Voice of Your Son. With His Wisdom to guide us, may we make time to ponder His Good News with gentle and generous spirits! Free us of the blindness of crass materialism. Open the eyes of our hearts, so we recognize You in the ones we “gift” this season. Let Your Son “come” to us this Advent, with a Spirit of Peace & Joy that empowers us to go “all in” for Him, not just as Christmas “enthusiasts”, but as *disciples* who will “follow His Lead”, “live His Word”, and light the world with His Love!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

12-03-2014 @ 0900

“Serving God Isn’t For Wimps!”

Acts 9:10-14



JOY TO THE WORLD!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven... and Heaven and nature sing!

Acts 9:10-14

There was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. He had a vision, in which the Lord said to him, “Ananias!” “Here I am, Lord,” he answered. The Lord said to him, “Get ready and go to Straight Street, and at the house of Judas, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying, and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he might see again.” Ananias answered, “Lord, many people have told me about this man, and about all the terrible things he has done to Your people in Jerusalem. And he has come to Damascus with authority from the chief priest to arrest all who worship You.” The Lord said to him, “Go, because I have chosen him to serve Me, to make My Name known to Gentiles and kings, and to the people of Israel. And I Myself will show him all that he must suffer for My sake.”

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Have you ever known someone, (police officer, fireman, or military service member, etc.) you believed to be *very* courageous because of the terrifying situations and people they face?
- Have *you* ever dreamed of being a “super hero” who boldly walks into horrifying situations, facing the villains, beating the bad guys, and saving the day for the helpless?
- Can you remember a “moment of testing”, in which you sensed “Direction from Above”, but felt quite sure “God had to be kidding” if *you* were “first choice” for the task?

Many children put “being a super hero” on their dream sheet when asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Such desire may be a natural outgrowth of the many fears we all experience while growing up. Some are bullied by those who are “bigger and stronger”; others are mocked by those who are “smarter” or “more gifted”; still others are ostracized by the “popular” or “privileged”. In any case, there is “failure to achieve acceptance” that leaves us aching for power to change such an agonizing alienation. While we all encounter such fears, much depends on how we use them as “spurs to progress” or “springboards to excellence”. In this case, Ananias is in real crisis. He knows Saul is a man with legal authority to arrest pretty much anyone he believes to be part of this “new way”, and haul them off to Jerusalem for trial and possible execution. He doesn’t even need any real evidence; mere suspicion will do. Once in Jerusalem, the religious “kangaroo court” can do as it sees fit—scourging, imprisonment, even stoning to death! Now God orders Ananias to “go into the enemy’s camp”, declaring that he is a Christian, and then pray for Saul. Most of us would have done exactly what Ananias did, and ask the Lord, “Really?” Notice how Ananias feels the need to “remind God” just who Saul is. God simply restates the hard part: “Go!” Serving God isn’t for wimps. A true “servant of God” must make a stand, regardless of personality, location, or situation. God, grant us the Grace of Ready Obedience. Help us learn from Ananias to be honest with You, but still willing to go as You direct. Make us confident enough in Your Love for us to follow where You lead, in a spirit of trust and fervent prayer. Make us a blessing to those who need our ministry, whether they are eager for our aid, or consider us fools or worse. Help us serve anyone, anywhere, anytime...in the Name of the One who went “all-out” for us. Now it’s our turn to go “all-in” for Him!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

12-04-2014 @ 0900

“Obedience Can Change a Life!”

Acts 9:15-20

JOY TO THE WORLD!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
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And Heaven... and Heaven and nature sing!



Acts 9:15-20

The Lord said to him, “Go, because I have chosen him to serve Me, to make My Name known to Gentiles and kings, and to the people of Israel. And I Myself will show him all that he must suffer for My sake.” So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him. “Brother Saul,” he said, “the Lord has sent me – Jesus Himself, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you might see again, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” At once, something like fish scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptized, and after he had eaten, his strength came back. Saul stayed for a few days with the believers in Damascus. He went straight to the synagogues and began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God!

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Have you ever known a “Moment of Truth”, an earth-shattering, life-changing Event that completely transformed your view of “life”, “religion”, “God”, and even your very *self*?
- Have you ever met an old friend or acquaintance, only to realize they had changed so completely you no longer knew them? Did it leave you wondering *what happened*?
- Did you ever find “obedience” a “tough pill to take” at the time, but found yourself profoundly glad later, as “things worked out” so much better than you ever hoped, dreamed, or imagined?

Any “new assignment” comes with a certain amount of apprehension, because we have so often had to face the “unplanned” and/or “unexpected”. This is even truer when *God* is the One sending us on that “New Assignment”! Ananias of Damascus wasn’t at all sure of what to expect when he met Saul of Tarsus, because all he had to go on was what he had heard from others. Even in our own lives, it’s been “easy” to “pre-judge” a person, place, thing, or time, often long before ever actually meeting, going, trying, or otherwise experiencing them. Fear, pride, anger, (among others,) can shut down a “vision of true possibilities”, and keep us from ever “stepping out” in hope, or “going forth” in faith. Ananias lays out his fears and concerns to the Lord honestly, but humbly; when God says, “Go!” he goes, an act of obedience that leads to the conversion and calling of the Apostle Saul, a conversion so total he needed a name change, becoming known in the Roman world as “Paul”. With that “new name”, Paul embraced a “missionary assignment”, spreading the Good News from Antioch in Asia Minor to the very center of the Empire...Rome itself! Imagine what might have happened if Ananias had said “No! NO! I can’t do it, Lord! I won’t go! It’s too risky!” What would have happened to Saul then? Someone had to go; what if God had called *us*? Would the world have had an Apostle Paul, or would we have chosen to stay in our “comfort zone”? Ananias chose obedience, and changed his life forever...but that was just the beginning! He changed Saul’s life, too, and what a change *that was*! With a “new vision”, and the Grace of God to endorse it, Saul went on to change the lives of countless others. God, grant us the Grace of Humble Obedience. When we’d rather stay in a “safe” condition, bless us with a “dangerous trust” until we finally surrender our fears and set aside our hesitations. As You say “Go!” make us willing to venture eagerly into “crisis situations” and “perilous places” You can use to reveal Your Glory and Wisdom! Teach us to OBEY with an “all-in” attitude!



DEVOTIONAL TIME

12-05-2014 @ 0900

"And You Thought You Were Bad!"

Acts 9:20-25



JOY TO THE WORLD!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven... and Heaven and nature sing!

Acts 9:20-25

"He went straight to the synagogues, and began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God. All who heard him were amazed, and asked, "Isn't he the one who in Jerusalem was killing those who worship that man Jesus? And didn't he come here for the very purpose of arresting those people and taking them back to the chief priests?" But Saul's preaching became even more powerful, and his proofs that Jesus was the Messiah were so convincing that the Jews who lived in Damascus could not answer him. After many days had gone by, the Jews met together and made plans to kill Saul, but he was told of their plan. Day and night, they watched the city gates in order to kill him. But one night Saul's followers took him, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket."

QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

- Have you ever looked back over your life, and found all sorts of factors that would render you "unfit" for any real ministry? For what reasons would you be "unworthy" of God's Service?
- Have you ever categorized those you know into groups of "good" and "bad", "forgivable" and "unforgivable", "worthy" and "unworthy", especially in the "church world"?
- Did you ever meet someone the world had "written off" as "worthless" or "unworthy", only to discover an amazing "child of God" had arisen from the wreckage of "ruined", "wasted" life?

Thanksgiving is history; even the leftovers are gone now; most people are in "Christmas mode"! But before we get too frenzied over December's festivities, let's take another look at the blessings of our Salvation and Forgiveness! Are we truly thankful for our Savior, and forgiveness His Mercy reveals? Far too many of us continue to carry our guilt and shame, even after "claiming Salvation". Notice how Paul left guilt and shame behind in this passage; see how he confused and stunned members of the synagogue in Damascus: "Isn't he the one who in Jerusalem was killing those who worship that man Jesus?" Saul was indeed that man..."guilty as sin" of everything being said about him. But Saul has been forgiven of all his sins. Because of this Mercy, his preaching gets even stronger! In the midst of the accusations, he is assured and upheld by Grace. What "other people are saying" has no bearing on who he is, for he is convinced he is a "child of God", and completely forgiven. (How many of us still carry those "sins" and "failings" for which we have been forgiven? How many of us regularly beat ourselves up over "hateful words" or "thoughtless deeds" God has chosen to forget?) Not only was Saul guilty of rounding up the followers of Jesus; he had collaborated with pride in their executions, convinced he was doing God's Will in ridding Israel of blasphemers! Have we done anything quite so severe? Probably NOT! So why "sideline" ourselves and leave ministry to others? God is calling us to action! It's time we "take a page from Saul's playbook"! God, grant us the Grace of Authentic Understanding! Help us to true repentance, with willingness to change what we can. Let us now approach Your Son, to seek Mercy and Forgiveness that makes us "joint heirs" with Him. He assures us we have all been set just as free as the Apostle Saul... no more, no less! Lord, help us get off the "pity pot", quit riding the "wagon of woe-is-me", and take our rightful place as "children of God"! Bless us as we take up our task of sharing the wonders of Your Good News with everyone! It's Advent!