

WHEN GOD SAYS 'NO'

And Other Radio Addresses

by
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CHAPTER TWO

FROM SHERIFF'S OFFICE TO PULPIT

THE blind young man stumbled falteringly along the center avenue of the Damascus highway, the street called Straight. On either side of him, in the second and third avenues, heavy traffic moved - toward the eastern gate, and toward the west. He could hear the creak and groan of wooden-wheeled ox carts, the shuffling of camels' hoofs, the swish-swish of the garments of the companions who led him, the scrape and clatter of wooden and leather-soled sandals on the pavement.

He had been smitten blind in a lightning flash of time, by a light that was phenomenal, terrific in its intensity, brighter than the noonday sun which even now beat upon him as he walked, led by the hand.

One moment he had been a man of vengeance, and, a moment later, a subdued and broken man, smitten by a glimpse of One Whom he had believed dead . . . smitten also by the words which that Man had spoken:

"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?"

ME! Was the Man JESUS not only alive, but had He so identified Himself with His disciples that He was one with them? Did he feel every heart throb of the pain of those who all over Palestine were suffering in His Name?

Such a voice! It had been a voice of love. He spoke to me, his enemy, in the voice of love! My bitter hatred clashed head-on with His love, and I fell, crushed under its power. Crushed, but also made whole . . . **"Crucified . . . nevertheless, I live . . ."**

The thoughts of the blind young man moved back over the events of the past week, to center upon one unforgettable scene - the stoning to death of the disciple, Stephen. He saw it reenacted once more as he had seen it so many times in recent days.

He saw again, lying at his feet, the little pile of vari-colored mantles of the witnesses and of the mob while they stoned the helpless victim into eternity. He heard the frenzied screams, the bedlam of voices that was like the rushing roar of a cyclonic wind, while the thoughts of the mob went mad with thirst for blood . . .

There had been a moment of tense silence while the witnesses, according to law, first laid their hands upon the head of the man Stephen, who, they said, had blasphemed GOD and therefore must die . . .

It was a horrible thing that he, the sheriff, had consented to, thinking he was doing GOD's service; but in so doing he had approved the murder of an innocent man. It had been a terrible death, yet strangely beautiful in spite of its terror . . .

Stripped of mantle and tunic, with only a cloth about his loins, his youthful muscles brown and strong, his face like the face of an angel . . . Stephen's death had been . . . victorious! . . .

With a vicious shove, the first witness pushed the man from the ten-foot-high scaffold, while the second witness held aloft a huge stone, waiting only until the body struck the earth before hurling it.

The stone crashed against the man's chest, and then like bedlam released, the mob finished the gruesome task. Great, jagged-edged boulders fell mercilessly against naked flesh. There was a breaking of bones, the spurting of blood. Stones and more stones, falling like hail from the hands of the delirious crowd - the very dregs of humanity - shouting, jostling, with livid faces and wild eyes . . .

What had Stephen said at the close of his address that had infuriated them so? It had infuriated him, Saul, to a blind hatred:

"I see heaven opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God!"

And then, without the city, while he was being martyred, the same Stephen had prayed, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"**

Lord JESUS! He had prayed to JESUS! He had believed not only that JESUS was alive but that prayer might be addressed to Him! That He was GOD! . . .

Through the days that had followed, the memory of the scene had burned its way deeper and deeper into the soul of the sheriff. Yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, he went unto the high priest and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues that if he found any of this Way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound (one hundred and fifty miles) to Jerusalem.

The blind young man stumbled on, while the eyes of his soul were being opened. And on either side, in the other two avenues, the traffic, too, moved on - oblivious to the revolution that was warring in the blind man's soul.

This was Damascus' most beautiful street, a 100-foot, three-avenue, Corinthian-columned highway, the street called Straight. Ah! But the risen Lord was paving a highway for missions that should lead to Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

Saul, like Stephen, had seen the risen Lord JESUS, and had heard His voice. Oh, Heavenly Vision! I must never be disobedient to it!

How could he have thought that in doing many things contrary to the name of JESUS of Nazareth, he had been doing GOD's service! Oh, the blindness of his heart!

"Go . . . wait."

That was the command he had received less than an hour ago, at the entering in of the city, while he lay prostrate upon the ground. **"Go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do."** That was all. How long must he wait? What would the high priest say, the one in whose home he was to have been welcomed as a guest? How long would he be blind? Forever? Ah, if only I could see again, I would go into ail the world and beseech men to be reconciled to GOD. I would tell them that CHRIST is come, indeed; that He was crucified, dead and buried, and that He is risen, indeed."

Can it be that He has chosen me to be an apostle! What is this strange burning in my heart? This - this fire! . . .

Creaks and groans of ox carts, babble of many voices, swishing of tasseled mantles, rattle of caparisoned saddles on camels, the mingled odor of sweating men and animals, the blazing sun pouring down upon his head - the missionary-in-the-making followed on, walking in the street called Straight, to the house where he must tarry until further orders should be received.

The first day passed; and the second. He refused all food and water. **"I am Jesus!"** the Voice of Love had declared.

He had seen JESUS! But the Voice had declared, **"I AM JESUS!"**

Over and over the experiences of the days just passed recalled themselves, and wrestled in his mind against the prejudices of a lifetime, until, like Jacob of old, he lay prostrate before the Mighty Conqueror, with his soul crying out, **"I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me!"**

This fire within me. Is it not His love! . . . **"Saul, Saul! . . . "**

The third day dawned, and he was still huddled in blindness in the house of a man named Judas, in Straight street. Judas! The same name as the name of the disciple who had betrayed Him to be crucified! That other Judas had betrayed Him. And I, a worse Judas still, have persecuted Him. Surely I am the chief of sinners!

No food. No drink. He was not hungry, except for the burning thirst of his soul that thirsted like David's heart for the waterbrook - for the Lord Himself.

What now profited his Roman Citizenship, his Hebrew birthright, his college training under Gamaliel, his flaming pharisaical zeal, his righteousness after the Law? They were to him now as the refuse of the burning garbage outside the camp. He would count them all but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of CHRIST JESUS, my lord!

And in that third day, in the house of Judas in the beautiful street called Straight, the Lord, to whom he had so recently yielded obedience, sent a vision, which only a little later was fulfilled in reality.

He heard the clatter of sandals on the pavement in the court.

He turned his head and in the vision saw a man crossing the open space coming toward the entrance to the house, saw the man circle the fountain in the center of the court, saw the servant at the door bow low, remove the stranger's sandals, saw the man coming toward the place where he was . . . felt gentle hands upon his head . . .

The vision was gone, but he had learned the man's name:

Ananias. Time passed, and the blind man waited.

Again, this time in reality, he heard the scrape and clatter of sandals in the court outside, heard low words at the entrance, footsteps moving softly toward him, gentle hands reaching out to touch him, being laid upon him, and then a voice:

"Brother Saul! . . . "

Brother I Strange, new, blessed relationship!

"The Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hast sent me that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost."

"And immediately, there fell from his eyes, as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose and was baptised."

"And when he had received meat, he was strengthened."

Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.

"And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God."

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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