

Sunday 15th October 2023 ay 9.00 am and 1030 am

CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS, THE LEADING PERSECUTOR OF THE CHRISTIANS

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church

READINGS:

Acts 9:1-6

Saul's Conversion

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3** As he neared Damascus on his journey,

suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. 6 “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

John 21:1-19

Jesus and the Miraculous Catch of Fish

1 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 3 “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with

you.” So, they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

5 He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

6 He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net

full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” 11 So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus Reinstates Peter

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

16 Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord,

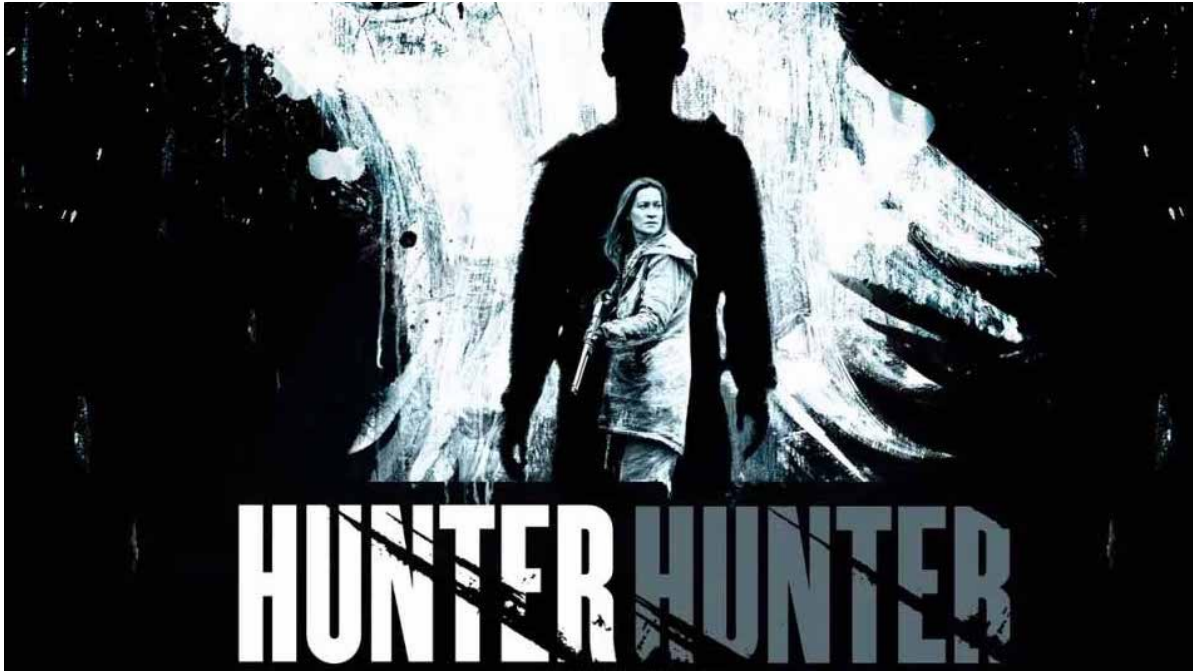
you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” Acts 9:4-5

INTRODUCTION



Richard Connell, in his famous story The Most Dangerous Game, talks about the adventure of his hero, Sanger Rainsford, one of the world's most celebrated big-game hunters.

Rainsford accidentally falls from his speeding yacht at night while en route to a hunting expedition along the coast of South America.

He is a strong swimmer and manages to beach himself on a foreboding island.

Rainsford knows the island is inhabited because he has heard shots during the night.

To his complete amazement he finds a palatial chateau inhabited by a Russian nobleman, General Zaroff, and his servant.

The general recognizes his visitor's name and welcomes him warmly because he too is a big-game hunter.

Rainsford is pleased with his good fortune—until the formal dinner that evening when during the conversation the general announces that he is hunting a “new animal” on the island.

When Rainsford inquires as to the identity of this “new animal,” the general answers,

“It supplies me with the most exciting hunting in the world. No other hunting compares with it for an instant. Every day I hunt, and I never

grow bored now, for I have a quarry with which I can match my wits.”

When Rainsford’s face shows great bewilderment, the general explains, “I wanted the ideal animal to hunt. So, I said: ‘What are the attributes of an ideal quarry?’

And the answer was, of course, ‘It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason.’ ”

“But no animal can reason,” Rainsford protests.

“My dear fellow,” the general responds, “there is one that can.”

“But you cannot mean—” Rainsford exclaims.

“And why not?”

“I cannot believe you are serious, General Zaroff. This is a grisly joke.”

“Why should I not be serious? I am speaking of hunting.”

To his growing horror, Sanger Rainsford, the great hunter, learns that he is Zaroff's intended game. The hunter has become the hunted.



Now on an infinitely higher level, that is what Acts 9 is all about. Are you surprised by this comment?

The Bible, I believe, can be earthy and confronting ... it can both unsettle ... and provoke us.

And I think this morning's reading from the book of Acts, on the conversion of Saul, is a good example.

Here too the pursuer became the prey. The hunter became the hunted.

Saul, a fierce persecutor of the church, discovered first to his horror ... and then to his eternal delight ... that he, the hunter, was also the hunted.

Saul's conversion was all of grace and by that, I mean, it was a gift of God.

You see, God suddenly interrupted him ... on his murderous mission ... and by grace ... transformed him ... into a new person.

And just as the church is one body composed of Jews and Gentiles, so Saul was one man, with both Jewish and Gentile relationships.

He was a Jew by birth, but a Gentile by his Roman citizenship.

He was also God's choice servant (v. 15) to announce the message of the church, this "mystery" that God had kept secret ... from ages past.

You see, Saul, being associated with both Jews and Gentiles, trained in the OT Scriptures as well as the Greek philosophies and Roman laws. He was the ideal person to give this new message that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile in Christ.

If you look carefully, you will notice his conversion experience can be summarised in these statements:

1. He saw a light
2. He heard a voice
3. He obeyed a call.

And perhaps it is not too strong a point to make that we, like Saul, live in spiritual darkness, until the light of the Gospel shines on us.

Saul heard the voice of the Lord ... but the men with him heard sounds ... they did not hear the words.

And did you notice ... how Christ humbled Saul! He “fell” not only physically ... but in his heart as well.

For all of us who are Christian, the story in Acts 9 is a picture of how we came to be his.

Now of course the details will be different ... but as we study Saul’s experience, we will learn how the divine hunt was conducted. And we will note a spiritual process of conversion.

We will see the interior workings of God's providence ... and, no doubt, we will be filled with hope and joy ... that the Lord is active, in mysterious ways, in our life today.

FIRSTLY, HUNTING THE HUNTER



The story begins with a description of the hunter and his prey:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's

disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. (vv. 1–2)

The hunter's quarry, according to our text, were those **“who belonged to the Way”** – they are the believers ... who, long before they were called Christians, were called **“the Way.”**

This was beautifully fitting ... because Christ had said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).**

And these early followers of the Lord Jesus Christ were the hunted – they were targets of Saul's murderous hatred!

Saul, the hunter, was a brutal, implacable, bloody man. His goal was nothing short of the complete extermination of the Way!

Verse 1 reads **“breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples”** literally it reads, “breathing in threats and murder.”

You see, **“Threatening and slaughter ... had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle.” Says AT Robertson.¹**

He was a frightening, violent enemy. You see, Saul later described his behaviour to Agrippa by saying:

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote

¹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Volume III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), p. 113.¹

against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.” (26:9–11)

He was a callous, self-righteous, bigoted, murderer ... set on a terrifying inquisition.

And Jerusalem could not hold him.

He sought and received extradition papers from the Sanhedrin so he could go to Damascus and ravage the growing Christian community there as well.

You may be interested to know it was 150 miles to Damascus ... about a week’s travel.

Do you see that he was Saul the hunter! Saul the man of blood!

Yet this persecutor, by the grace of God, became an apostle of Jesus Christ.

The story of Saul's spiritual transformation ... ought to remind us ... never to write anyone off ... as being beyond the love of Christ.

And we may do so with relatives whom we know ... have heard of Jesus for years ... without response ... or a sinner who has gone to a crass level of depravity ... or someone who has gone into a cult or is propagating false doctrine. But Scripture is clear - God can reach anyone!

And the workings of the divine hunter are subtle and profound. As Saul set out ... on his bloodthirsty hunt ... he, unknowingly, ...was also the hunted.

The Hound of Heaven was tracking him down ... just as surely as the persecutor ... was tracking down God's saints. There were two hunting

expeditions going on here ... Saul's ...and the Lord's.

We know from Acts 26 that Jesus said to Saul at the time of his conversion, **“It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (v. 14)**. You see a goad was a stick with which one poked an ox to get him moving.

Sometimes ... an ox would kick up its heels ... at the stick - a futile endeavour.

Jesus was saying, “Saul, you’re kicking against the interior workings of the Spirit of God ... and it is pointless.”

These goads included, I believe:

- Stephen who prayed for his murderers - **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”**

- and the men ... and women ... who bravely refused to deny their Lord, suffering imprisonment and even death.

Such goads kept poking the persecutor ... and in moments of honesty ... he must have wondered whether his attacks on the Church were indeed just ... **“How can people suffer and die like this if they are believing and preaching a lie?”**

But Saul would kick against the goads ... and push the thoughts away.

He probably knew something was wrong ... but was unwilling to examine himself or to repent.

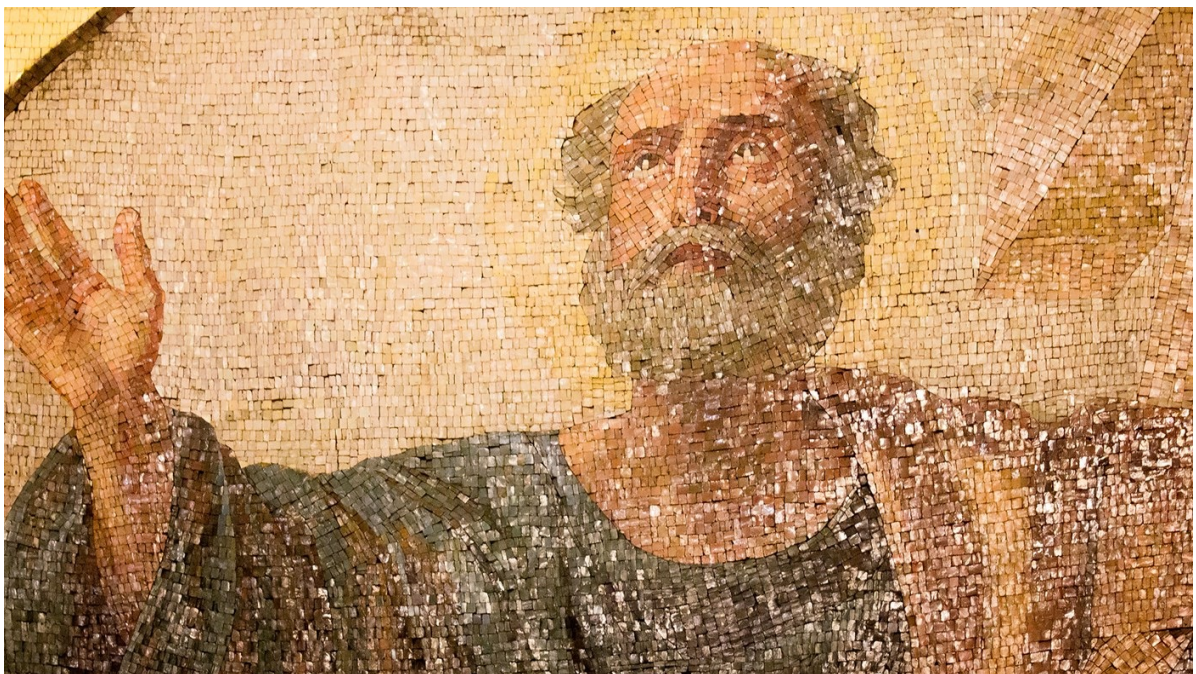
He was likely oppressed by guilt ... he was a religious leader after all ... authorising the brutal killing of people whom he disagreed with. A religious leader?!

On that fateful day on the Damascus Road, it was midday, the time for the traditional Middle-Eastern siesta.

But Saul was ... so bent on destruction ... that he had no time for sleep.

And he had no idea ... of what was about to occur ... the hunter was being hunted ... and the interior assaults of God's grace ... were softening him for the final onslaught. The Hound of Heaven was at hand.

SECONDLY, SAUL WAS CAPTURED BY CHRIST



We all know now ... that Saul's destiny was about to change ... as he approached Damascus ... a beautiful white city on a green plain.

There was a blinding flash, and suddenly ... Saul was quivering ... and lying in the dirt. **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”**

The voice began with the traditional formal double intonation of his name. But Saul did not know who was speaking to him.

He did not know ... what was going on. **“Who are you, Lord?”** ... Lord ... you see ... was a term of respect - “Who are you, sir?”

The voice's response hit home like a bolt of lightning: **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”**.

Now, I am sure Jesus' words ... triggered an ongoing explosion within the persecutor mind.

At least two things burst on Saul's conscience.

Firstly, Jesus Christ was alive! Verse 17 of our text, as well as 1 Corinthians 15:8, indicates that Saul actually saw Christ.

And later ... he would present this vision ... as part of his apostolic credentials.

Everything in his life had opposed this, but now ... he knew Christ was alive ... and if Christ was alive...

Secondly, Saul now knew he was not merely attacking those belonging to the Way - he was persecuting Christ, the Messiah.

I would not ... have liked ... to have been Saul ... at this point in time ... what about you?!

He now understood the spiritual unity between Jesus and the church.

This truth ... was at once terrible ... and wonderful, but Saul ... was at first ... overwhelmed by its terror.

While he lay prostrate, the voice instructed him,

“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (v. 6).

Luke goes on ... to describe the situation:

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So, they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. (vv. 7–9)

Do you notice the irony here ... the great hunter who was going to wreak havoc on the Damascus church ... entered Damascus led by the hand - blind, weak, powerless.

Saul was frightened and in despair. This was the midnight of his soul. You see ... his physical blindness ... paralleled his spiritual blindness.

But though he was blind, he had seen Christ, and as he saw Christ, he also saw himself ... for the first time.

His life was utterly wrong.

He was a criminal before God.

As he wrote later, **“Nothing good lives in me”**
Romans 7:18.

As Christ's enemy ... he had drawn blood ... and now darkness was everywhere ... especially within his own soul.

The hunter had been hunted down. And there was no escape.

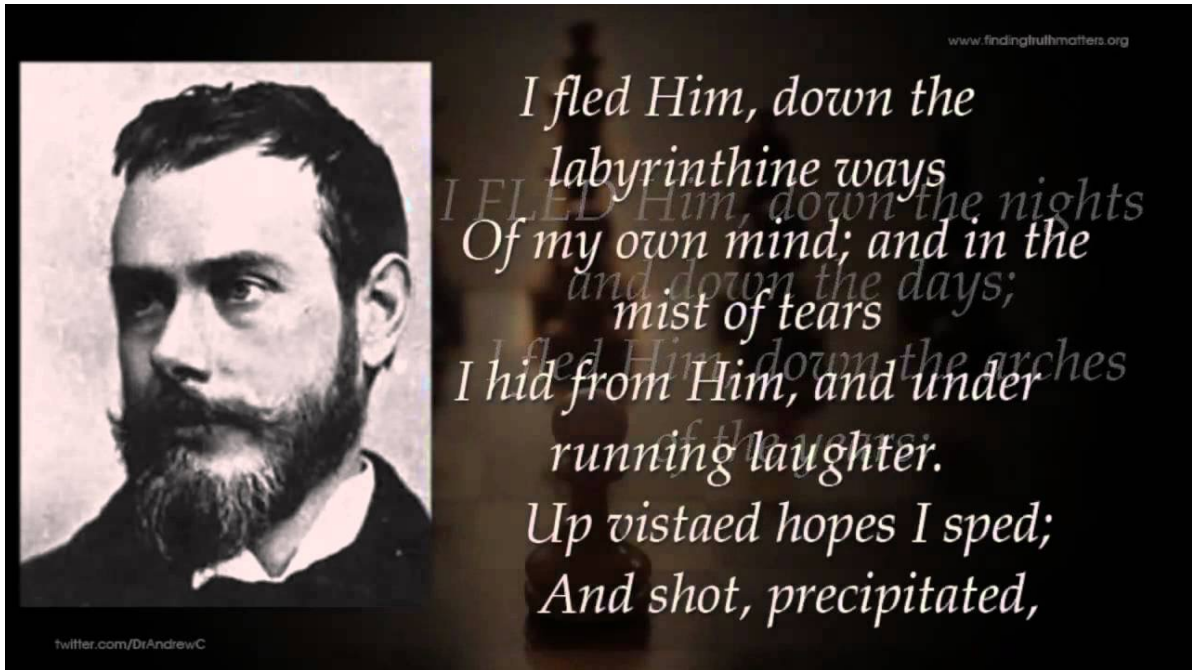
Now, what do you think ... we can learn from all this?

I think, primarily ... Christ is always the initiator.

I believe it is also true ... he still seeks sinners today.

And that we can never be sure ... in whom this grace is working ... but we know that God ... makes the first move.

You see it is clear ... Jesus orchestrated the Damascus confrontation ... and ... I believe ...he directs our encounters as well.



Allow me to share a moving story of a person called **Francis Thomson**. His early life was one dead-end after another.

- He studied for the priesthood but did not complete the course
- He studied medicine but failed
- He joined the military but was released after one day
- He finally became an opium addict in London
- But he could not get away from God's persistent love for him

During his despondency Thomson was befriended by a person ... who saw his poetic gifts, and eventually Thomson was able ... to share his experience in verse.

His famous poem is, of course, **The Hound of Heaven**, which has been called one of the finest odes in the English language.

And perhaps, many of us today have experienced the truth of Thomson's powerful words:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated
Down Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed
after me.ⁱ

It is earthy and confronting to say ... Christ is always the hunter ... and the initiator.

I, like Saul, have found he brings us to our knees ... acknowledging how desperately ... we need him.

If there was ever anyone ... and who had come to the end of himself ... and who was truly “poor in spirit,” it was Saul.

He writes in Philippians “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7).

So, allow me to ask ... have we been brought to the end of our resources?

If so, there is hope for you this morning.

Have we ever been ... completely helpless ...
unless the Lord intervened?

Have we ever given up ... and given in to Christ?

Maybe our Damascus Roads are less dramatic
than Saul's ...

but they are meant to have the same effect - to
break our fiery independence ...

to break our arrogance ...

and to bring us to Christ ... for salvation.

Our Damascus Roads are meant to show our
emptiness ...

and the greatness of Christ.

Have we got the message yet?

And here is a very profound and humbling truth ...
the divine hunter chooses us!

The Lord told Ananias, **“This man [Saul] is my chosen instrument to carry my name” (9:15)**, and Saul would gladly proclaim Christ for the rest of his life.

He marvelled at the splendours of God’s grace ... and so do we.

Scripture says, **He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children. Ephesians 1:4–5**

CS Lewis saw this clearly in his own conversion:

I did not then see ... what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility

which will accept a convert even on such terms.

[we] ... plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion [in seeking us] is our liberation.²

That final line is my favourite: “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion [in seeking us] is our liberation.”

You see the inner workings of God’s grace ... touches our lives ... in ways ... we are sometimes not even aware of:

- an appropriate word ... spoken here and there
- pressures, stress or

² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), p. 229.²

- lack of pressure, boredom
- joys
- sorrows
- tragedies ... which we might later call a
'severe mercy'
- subtle workings
- all orchestrated by the divine hunter

And like Saul ... finally ... our vistas are opened
... and we see!

I close by saying ...

Christ brings us to the end of ourselves ...

and we receive the joy of a new life ...

beyond our imagination ...

free ...

and abounding ...

saved to serve ... saved to proclaim ... the
majesty ... and wonder ... of God ... in the
Messiah Jesus Christ!!

AMEN

The Hound of Heaven

By Francis Thompson (1859–1907)

I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

5

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase, 10
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.' 15
I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
Trellised with intertwining charities;
(For, though I knew His love Who followèd,
Yet was I sore adread 20
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside).
But, if one little casement parted wide,
The gust of His approach would clash it to.
Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.
Across the margent of the world I fled, 25
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,
Smiting for shelter on their clangèd bars;
Fretted to dulcet jars
And silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon.
I said to Dawn: Be sudden—to Eve: Be soon; 30
With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
From this tremendous Lover—
Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!
I tempted all His servitors, but to find
My own betrayal in their constancy, 35
In faith to Him their fickleness to me,
Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit.

To all swift things for swiftness did I sue;
Clung to the whistling mane of every wind.
But whether they swept, smoothly fleet, 40
The long savannahs of the blue;
Or whether, Thunder-driven,
They clanged his chariot 'thwart a heaven,
Plashy with flying lightnings round the spurn o' their feet:—
Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue. 45
Still with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following Feet,
And a Voice above their beat— 50
'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'
I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies, 55
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully;
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
With dawning answers there,
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair. 60
'Come then, ye other children, Nature's—share
With me' (said I) 'your delicate fellowship;
Let me greet you lip to lip,
Let me twine with you caresses,
Wantoning 65
With our Lady-Mother's vagrant tresses,
Banqueting

With her in her wind-walled palace,
Underneath her azured daïs,
Quaffing, as your taintless way is, 70
From a chalice
Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring.’
So it was done:
I in their delicate fellowship was one—
Drew the bolt of Nature’s secrecies. 75
I knew all the swift importings
On the wilful face of skies;
I knew how the clouds arise
Spumèd of the wild sea-snortings;
All that’s born or dies 80
Rose and drooped with; made them shapers
Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine;
With them joyed and was bereaven.
I was heavy with the even,
When she lit her glimmering tapers 85
Round the day’s dead sanctities.
I laughed in the morning’s eyes.
I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine; 90
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven’s grey cheek. 95
For ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound *I* speak—

Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.

Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;

Let her, if she would owe me,

100

Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me

The breasts o' her tenderness:

Never did any milk of hers once bless

My thirsting mouth.

Nigh and nigh draws the chase,

105

With unperturbèd pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy;

And past those noisèd Feet

A voice comes yet more fleet—

'Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st not Me!'

110

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!

My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,

And smitten me to my knee;

I am defenceless utterly.

I slept, methinks, and woke,

115

And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.

In the rash lustihead of my young powers,

I shook the pillaring hours

And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,

I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years—

120

My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.

My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,

Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.

Yea, faileth now even dream

The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;

125

Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossomy twist

I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,

Are yielding; cords of all too weak account
For earth with heavy griefs so overplussed.

Ah! is Thy love indeed 130

A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?

Ah! must—

Designer infinite!—

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it? 135

My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;

And now my heart is as a broken fount,

Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever

From the dank thoughts that shiver

Upon the sighful branches of my mind. 140

Such is; what is to be?

The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?

I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;

Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds

From the hid battlements of Eternity; 145

Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then

Round the half-glimpsèd turrets slowly wash again.

But not ere him who summoneth

I first have seen, enwound

With glooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned; 150

His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.

Whether man's heart or life it be which yields

Thee harvest, must Thy harvest-fields

Be dunged with rotten death?

Now of that long pursuit 155

Comes on at hand the bruit;

That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:

‘And is thy earth so marred,
Shattered in shard on shard?
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me! 160
Strange, piteous, futile thing!
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
Seeing none but I makes much of naught’ (He said),
‘And human love needs human meriting:
How hast thou merited— 165
Of all man’s clotted clay the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me? 170
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home: 175
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!’
Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
‘Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, 180
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.’