

## Acts Part 21 – Saul the Persecutor

A sermon series by Pastor Byron Chesney Wednesday, February, 10, 2016

Last week we finished up Chapter 7 and looked at how quickly Stephen's defense/sermon turned into an attack on those that were charging him. He told them that they were acting like their fathers before them, persecuting the prophets and resisting the Holy Spirit. He called them "stiffnecked" and "uncircumcised in heart and ears." This was more than they could take and the Bible says they were "cut to the heart" and then they rushed him like a pack of wild animals, gnashing on him with their teeth. They drug him outside of the city, stoned him to death. And the last words we hear out of Stephen's mouth are these: **Acts 7:60** *And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

We also read last week in **Chapter 7, verse 8b**: *...and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.*

Tonight's message picks up from there in Chapter 8 verse 1:

### † **Acts 8:1-4**

1 *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

2 *And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.*

3 *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*

4 *Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*

As we discussed last time and many times before in the past, the man Saul is the man that we also know as the Apostle Paul. I can't even count the number of times I have heard someone say; "well you know, the Lord changed Saul's name to Paul after he was saved." But, that simply is not true. We read nowhere in the Bible that the Lord changed his name. In fact, we are point blank told in the Scriptures that he was called both: **Acts 13:9**: *Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him.* And that is the last time the Bible refers to him as Saul.

You may be thinking, well pastor, why spend so much time talking about that? Why do you get all bent out of shape over something trivial like that? Well, let me tell you why.

1<sup>st</sup> of all I do not consider anything in the Bible as "trivial." I believe every single word that was written is important and if it wasn't then God wouldn't have put it in there.

2<sup>nd</sup> God is not the author of confusion but men certainly are. When you start saying from behind the pulpit or the Sunday school lectern that "God changed Saul's name to Paul," you are actually adding something to the Bible that is not there.

3<sup>rd</sup> His name was never changed. His Hebrew name was the traditional Saul, most likely named after King Saul, but his Roman name was Paul which means "small in stature." But the important thing to remember here is that God ordained Paul to be a preacher unto the Gentiles. The Gentiles consisted mainly of Romans. They would be more familiar with the name Paul than they would Saul and would be more acceptable of him being identified as a Roman citizen.

**Vs.1a**: *And Saul was consenting unto his death.* To be consenting unto something means that you are pleased with it and agree with it. Saul was pleased and agreed to the death of Stephen. He mentions the fact himself over in Acts 20 when he told what transpired between him and the Lord when the Lord called him to be a preacher and he was trying to explain why the brethren in Jerusalem would not accept him: **Acts 22:20**: *And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.*

**Vs.1b**: *And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem;* Obviously based on their zeal of murdering Stephen, the Jews decided it was open game on Christians. They wanted to completely stomp out Christianity and the name of Jesus once and for all. So they began persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem. This probably consisted of arresting, harassing, beating, and threatening anyone known to be a Christian. At that time there were thousands of Christians in Jerusalem because the Church had multiplied numerous times by then.

**Vs.1c**: *and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.* It looks like the Jews have had great success because they manage to scatter the Christians all over the country. I'm sure it looked like they had destroyed the Church and they would soon no longer have to hear the name Jesus again. What they didn't realize was that the Church cannot be confined to one place. All they managed to do was to make the Church even bigger by spreading it all over Judea.

"except the apostles" The Bible does not explain the reasons the Apostles did not scatter, perhaps it was because of their experience and deeper understanding of the Lord that they stayed knowing that to be punished for believing in Jesus was an honor. Or it could be that they were determined not to let the Church be defeated in Jerusalem.

**Vs. 2** *And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.* We are not told who the devout men were that carried Stephen away and saw that he was properly buried. It just says they were "devout" men. This could either mean religious men or just very decent upstanding men. The Bible uses this word 3 times; once in **Luke 2:25** speaking of Simeon, the old Spirit filled man in the Temple when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be consecrated unto the Lord. **Luke 2:25**: *And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.* And secondly in **Acts 2:5**: *And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.*

**Vs.3a** *As for Saul, he made havock of the church,*

<sup>1</sup>Albert Barnes's notes on the Bible explains the word havoc pretty well. He says: *He made havoc - This word is commonly applied to wild beasts, to lions, wolves, etc., and denotes the "devastations" which they commit. Saul raged against the church like a wild beast - a strong expression, denoting the zeal and fury with which he engaged in persecution.*

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Barnes's Notes on the Bible

I want you to notice that the Bible consistently applies the word “**Church**” (*ek-klay-see'-ah*) to a called out assembly of people and not a building. It said Saul **made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison**. The early Church at times met in the Synagogues and the Temple for public worship but their main meeting places were people’s homes where they engaged in the study of Scripture, prayer, and eating meals together.

There are other instances of seeing where people met in homes:

**Acts 2:46:** And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

**Acts 5:42:** And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

Then later in Acts 12 after the angel frees Peter from prison we read where he goes to a house where people were gathered together praying: **Acts 12:12-13:** And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

While we like to model ourselves after the early New Testament Church, that doesn’t mean that it is wrong to meet in a building set aside for worship. Some people take it to the extremes and make such claims as a Church building is unbiblical and wrong. But that simply is not true. There is no biblical mandate that says the Church must meet in a private home and in fact, I want to propose to you that the early Church did in fact meet in other buildings besides private homes.

Look with me at: **Acts 19:8-10:** And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God. 9 But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. 10 And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

While in Ephesus, Paul first taught Jesus for 3-months in the local synagogue. Then when a dispute arose he moved out of the synagogue and began meeting along with the disciples in the school of Tyrannus. This was obviously a building or place set aside for a school and they allowed Paul to teach and preach for 2-years there.

**Acts 20:7-11:** And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight. 8 And there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together. 9 And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead. 10 And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him. 11 When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.

Here again we find the Apostle Paul meeting together with disciples in a place that had an “upper chamber with many lights.” Now, this could have perhaps been someone’s home but whatever it was it had to be a fairly large structure. Just as we read in Acts 1 and 2 where the disciples and 120 people met in an upper room. So, to say that the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church only met in houses is not completely accurate.

**Vs.3b entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison** Obviously Saul had carte blanche to do whatever he pleased to Christians. I doubt he single handily pulled these people out of their homes. No doubt he had help. Saul was very zealous in his persecution of Christians and he talks about it over in **Acts 26:9-11:** I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. 11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

He also mentions his zeal in his letter to the **Galatians 1:13-14:** For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: 14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. Saul of Tarsus was ruthless and determined to destroy Christianity and would do anything to make that happen.

**Vs. 4 Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.** But we see what the results were in all of Saul’s persecution of the Church, it caused the Gospel to be spread even further. Saul was responsible for spreading the Gospel even before he was saved and he didn’t even know it!

I want to end tonight by reading you what Albert Barnes says in his commentary concerning the scattering and preaching of the word:

<sup>2</sup>They were manifestly common Christians who were scattered by the persecution; and the meaning is, that they communicated to their fellow-men in conversation wherever they met them, and probably in the synagogues, where all Jews had a right to speak, the glad tidings that the Messiah had come. It is not said that they set themselves up for public teachers, or that they administered baptism, or that they founded churches, but they proclaimed everywhere the news that a Saviour had come. Their hearts were full of it. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks; and they made the truth known to “all” whom they met. We may learn from this:

- (1) That persecution tends to promote the very thing which it would destroy.
- (2) That one of the best means to make Christians active and zealous is to persecute them.
- (3) That it is right for all Christians to make known the truths of the gospel. When the heart is full the lips will speak, and there is no more impropriety in their speaking of redemption than of anything else.
- (4) It should be the great object of all Christians to make the Saviour known “everywhere.” By their lives, their conversation, and their pious exhortations and entreaties, they should beseech dying sinners to be reconciled to God.

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† All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Barnes, Notes on the Bible