

Part 25 – Saul the Persecutor

A sermon series by Pastor Byron Chesney Wednesday, March 9, 2016

† Acts 9:1-8

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,
2 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 unto Jerusalem.
3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, **Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?**
5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, **I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.**
6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord **said** unto him, **Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.**
7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.
8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought *him* into Damascus.

In our last study we finished up Chapter 8 which looked at the ministry of Philip the Evangelist and the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch. We discussed how everything that Philip did was in accordance to the Holy Spirit. At the very end we read this: **Acts 8:39-40:** **And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.**

Tonight with the help of the Lord I want us to start Chapter 9 and cover verses 1-8 which deals with Saul the Persecutor.

First I would like to give a little bit of background on who Saul of Tarsus is. Many of you went through the 26-week Bible study we did on the life of the Apostle Paul about 4-years ago, so this may be familiar to you but nevertheless we need to explain for this Bible series.

In our opening text the Bible refers to a man named **Saul**. We know this to be **Saul of Tarsus**. He was born around the same time that Jesus was born. He was a Jew. Not only was he a Jew but he was a Hebrew and of the tribe of Benjamin. Most likely he was named after King Saul, the first King of Israel. He was a Pharisee as was his father a Pharisee. It is also believed that he was a member of the highest court in the land, the Sanhedrin Court. His Hebrew name was Saul and his Gentile name was Paul. He was born a free Roman citizen because his father was a Roman citizen.

As a young boy, Saul would have been taught by his mother up to the age of 5, then his father would take over his education. During this time he would learn a trade along with Scripture and the Jewish way of life. In Saul's case it was the trade of tent making. At 13-years old he would be sent to Jerusalem to attend Rabbi School and we know from Scripture that he sat under the teaching of the most famous

Jewish Rabbi, **Gamaliel**. He would remain in Rabbi School until his mid 20's and then he would begin his profession of being a lawyer.

Paul spending so many years in Jerusalem and being steeped in the law and the ways of the Pharisees, would become very biased against Christianity. I'm sure we do not know half of the things that Paul did against Christians but rest assured he was known as the Christian hater. I wonder what Christians used to refer to him as: Saul the Slayer, Saul the Prosecutor, Saul the Slime ball???

The events in the text that we just read, occurred just after a pivotal moment in Saul's life, the martyrdom of Stephen. The Bible says that after they stoned Stephen that they, **Acts 7:58** **And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was **Saul**.**

Then the story continues into chapter 8.

Acts 8:1-3: **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.**

As far as Saul was concerned, he was on top of his game. He was the in the who's-who of the Jewish courts. He was a ruthless prosecutor willing to do whatever it took to stomp out the name of Jesus. To destroy Christianity if at all possible. In fact, this was his number one goal in life. He hated Jesus and he hated Christians.

Then the next thing we read about Saul is what we read tonight starting in **Chapter 9**. **1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2 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 unto Jerusalem. 3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:**

Saul wasn't going to waste any time. He knew that he needed to strike while things were hot. It says that "**he came near Damascus**." We are not told why Saul specifically wanted to go to Damascus for this, no doubt he had heard that there were a large number of Christians who went there when they dispersed. Also, I noticed that he specifically mentioned going into the **Synagogues** to get the Christians. This is further proof that the early New Testament Church did not only meet in private houses. They continued meeting in the Jewish Synagogues for public worship.

The distance between Jerusalem and Damascus is around 150 miles. This is how far Saul was willing to travel to persecute Christians. Bear in mind he had no vehicle to drive, no airplane to ride in, no subways, it was all by foot or on the back of an animal. 150 miles to carry out his terrible plan. I am of the belief that Saul has been under conviction ever since the stoning of Stephen. I think that was the catalyst that caused him to fight harder against Christianity. You will find that in a lot of people's lives when they are under conviction they fight that much harder against the Holy Spirit. I think that was what Saul was doing. In fact, I know that is the case because Jesus says so in **verse 5** when he said "**it is hard for you to kick against the pricks.**"

"and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven." Without a shadow of doubt I can tell you that this light that shone around Saul of Tarsus was the glory of the Lord Jesus. He was like the pillar of fire or the great transfiguration that the disciples witnessed. It was Jesus in all of his glory appearing to Saul.

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

I love how Jesus gets people's attention. Notice he called out Saul's name twice. He often did this when getting people's attention; Martha, Martha, Simon, Simon, Jerusalem, Jerusalem. It is the Lord's way of saying "hey, listen up!"

I also notice that Jesus accuses Saul of persecuting HIM. Friends, when you persecute Christians you aren't just persecuting a group of people, you are persecuting the Lord Jesus Himself. Saul was fighting against much more than just some Jews gone Christian, he was battling the Messiah.

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

If ever there was a time in Saul's life that he was scared, it would have been this moment right here. I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt Saul already knew who it was that was in his presence. I believe he asked this through a trembling voice of fear and dread of hearing the answer.

WHO ART THOU LORD? I AM JESUS WHOM THOU PERSECUTEST.

Oh how Saul must have been trembling. How he must have felt that his life was soon to be over. The very Jesus he had been trying to rid the world of was now manifesting himself to Paul. No doubt Saul assumed his next breath would be his last on earth and his next in hell.

But oh my friend. In all of the annals of history if ever there was an example of the Grace of God, it is here in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. The greatest prosecutor the Church had ever known. A man that deserved no mercy, no grace, no love, yet the Lord Jesus bestowed his grace upon Saul. **"it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks"** This statement from the Lord makes it very obvious that Saul of Tarsus had been fighting against conviction. I personally believe it began when Stephen was preaching Christ just before they stoned him to death. I believe with all my heart that Saul of Tarsus fell under deep conviction yet he fought against it, or as Jesus puts it, he **"kicked against the pricks."**

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

Saul, lying on the road, blinded, defeated, trembling, yet overcome with amazement manages to utter these words: **"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"** Now, I don't want you to miss this. A lot of people wonder when Saul of Tarsus was actually saved. You need not wonder anymore. It occurred the very instance when he trusted Jesus Christ as His Savior. Verse 6 is a picture of a man is repenting of his sins and acknowledging Christ as his Savior.

How can we know for sure this was when Saul was saved? Well, all we have to do is turn to Acts 26 and hear it from Paul's own words as he is telling it to King Agrippa:

Acts 26:13-18: At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. 14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? *it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.* 15 And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. 16 But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; 17 Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, 18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

He told Saul that he has made him a minister to spread the Gospel. Jesus doesn't make preachers out of lost men. Yes, my friend, Saul of Tarsus was saved on that road to Damascus that day. And, he was saved by God's marvelous grace.

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. 8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

Saul of Tarsus was one of the most horrible sinners to ever walk the face of the earth. He persecuted the Church and Jesus to a degree that you and I can't even imagine. Saul was not good enough to be saved. You are not good enough to be saved. I am not good enough to be saved. No one on the face of the earth is good enough to be saved. I don't know what you've done in your life. I don't know the thoughts you have had in your head. I don't know the sins you have committed but let me tell you something that I do know. I do know that if God can forgive and save a horrible sinner like Saul the Persecutor he can certainly forgive and save you.

Listen to the words of Saul as he writes to Timothy:

1 Timothy 1:12-16

12 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry;

13 Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief.

14 And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

15 This *is* a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

16 Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.

I'm glad to know that if the Lord can save a persecutor like Saul of Tarsus, he can save folks like you and me.

† All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version