

## **SAUL OF TARSUS**

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On August 10, 1994, in the city of Arak, Iran, a woman was sentenced to death by stoning. According to the ruling of the religious judge, her husband and two children were forced to attend the execution. The woman urged her husband to take the children away, but to no avail. A truck full of stones was brought in to be used during the stoning. In the middle of the stoning, although her eyes had been gouged out, the victim was able to escape from the ditch and started running away, but the regime's guards recaptured her and shot her to death.

It was a day that will live in infamy so far as heaven's calendar is concerned. It was the day the young prophetic preacher, Stephen, was violently stoned to death by the church board (Sanhedrin) of Jerusalem. They didn't like his testimony of Jesus Christ. This day was marked on the prophetic calendar as 34 A.D. and the angel Gabriel revealed it to Daniel the prophet. This concluded the 490 years that had been given to the Jews to receive Jesus as the one sent from God as their sin-bearer. Since Stephen was God's messenger, the leadership of the church had, in effect, rejected the Lord Himself. They murdered him in cold blood.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* writes: "Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged Stephen out of town, pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them. As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, 'Master Jesus, take my life.' Then he knelt down praying loud enough for everyone to hear, 'Master, don't blame them for this sin'—his last words. Then he died. Saul was right there, congratulating the killers."

Nowadays such an accomplice to a brutal and bloody crime of terrorism receives the same sentence as the butcher. This is the first pen picture that we have of Saul in the Bible with blood on his hands. How did Saul get to this point in his young life that he was associated with such terrorist activities? How did he become a Jesus hater? How did Saul become a party to Stephen's brutal murder, standing "in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (Acts 7:58; 8:1)? To understand the answer to this question will lead us to appreciate why

Paul later called himself “the chief of sinners” and why he had a deep, and abiding heart appreciation for the cross of Christ.

Paul tells us where he was born. “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city” (Acts 21:39). Tarsus, was a bustling seaside metropolis, located on the Turkish Mediterranean. Culturally diverse, an international trade center, Tarsus, was strategically situated on the Roman east-west Interstate. His Jewish parents were members of the religious political party of the Pharisees—a fervid nationalist movement—for strict obedience to the law of Moses and Jewish separatism from Rome. Saul was motherless from the age of nine. His father was a prominent tentmaker with a thriving business. Although he carried a Roman passport as a freeman and citizen, his main allegiance was to the land of Judea.

By the age of thirteen Saul had a facility in Latin, Greek, and the Hebrew languages. He had a photographic memory having memorized the Old Testament. The adolescent was sent to Jerusalem to attach himself to the famed rabbi, Gamaliel. Over the course of the next six years, he learned all the historic interpretations of any given text. He was trained as a lawyer to debate and orate. With such a powerful mind Saul was destined to outstrip his mentor and take his seat on the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, as a ruler of the Jews, those seventy-one men who presided over all Jewish religious and civil life.

At the height of this career he found himself listening to Stephen’s argument in the case “The People of Judea versus Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Of course, Stephen lost that case and paid for it with his life, Saul being a willing and consenting participant.

Since the day of Pentecost the Spirit-filled apostles were giving the religious establishment fits. Their attempts to silence the followers of Jesus by crucifying their Master had backfired. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had fueled the disciples of Jesus to preach on the streets and in the public places of Jerusalem. They were arrested and thrown into prison, but angels were releasing them at midnight with the guards even noticing, and the Council was perplexed to know what to do to put a halt to it.

Saul knew exactly what to do. He hated these Jesus’ people with all the white, hot, fiery, passion within him. He volunteered to be the Grand Inquisitor of the Christians and root them out. He later admitted in his defense before King Agrippa: “I verily thought with

myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. 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” (Acts 26:9-11). There is no worse fanatic than a religious zealot who justifies his rapine and violent rampage by invoking the name of God.

Saul “began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:3). Can you imagine a religious leader presenting his monthly report to the President of the Council,—thirty-five Christian homes invaded and pillaged; fifty incarcerated for worshiping Jesus; ten flogged, with skin stripped, for refusing to recant; three justifiable killings due to intransigence? It’s no wonder that Paul later wrote of his early activities, “I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:12, 13). It seems almost incredible that any one professing to worship the true God, can have such false ideas of Him as to suppose that He is pleased with that kind of service; yet Saul of Tarsus, was one of the most bitter and relentless persecutors of Christians that ever lived.

When Paul was doing that work of persecution, he was simply enforcing the law. He was not a man to do that for which he had no warrant. He was “more exceedingly zealous of the traditions” of the fathers than were any others of his time. Yet who is there that will say that he was doing his duty in thus persecuting and wasting the church of Christ?

When the Saul crushed the fingers of a Christian, or had him crucified, or beheaded, or sent to the mines, he was simply doing what he thought he ought to do, because the laws bade him do it. He would say that he was only “doing his duty.” He might be a humane man, and averse to causing misery, yet his mistaken sense of duty spurred him on, so that the most conscientious man became the worst persecutor.

When I lived in northern Idaho, I frequently traveled a state route along a watercourse which featured a series of several small villages: first, West Hope; then, Hope; then East Hope; and finally, Beyond Hope. Well, if there is any lesson that we can learn from the early

career of Saul it is that no one is “beyond hope” when God intervenes and calls that lost soul.

In God’s foreknowledge He knew about Saul long before he was born. He writes, “It pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace” (Gal. 1:15). God called Saul despite his reckless abandon and senseless bigotry. But not only does God’s foreknowledge take in a Saul, but He knew about you long before your birth. And God’s foreknowledge has a plan of redemption, a purpose for you. He predestined you to be saved in Christ Jesus. “For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). God’s election encompasses everyone who has ever lived or ever will live.

“Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called” (Rom. 8:30). God calls everyone. He calls you. “And whom He called, them He also justified.” In an objective sense Christ’s death is an act so extravagantly comprehensive that it encircles the globe, so that God is able to treat everyone as pardoned for their sin. This wonderful gift is wrapped in the person of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is literally given by God to every individual. “And whom He justified, them He also glorified” (Rom. 8:29, 30). This gift of legal justification if unhindered by the recipient, effects the fruitage of sanctifying power in the life, and is revealed in ultimate glorification at the Lord’s appearing. All of this is God’s predestination for every soul. Though the wicked are mercifully granted temporary pardon for a brief lifetime, by their choice of frustrating the grace of God, they unhappily never experience the benefit of the forgiveness of their sins and its unleashed power in their lives.

God loved Saul. He had this gift for Saul. He called Saul. Augustine called Paul’s conversion “the violent capture of a rebel will.” Saul’s blood is boiling. He charged north out of Jerusalem with the fury of Alexander the Great sweeping across Persia, and the determined resolve of William Tecumseh Sherman in his scorching march across Georgia.

He is borderline out of control. “And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, 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 unto Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1, 2). There were many thousands of Jews living in Damascus and

worshiping in their synagogues. Saul knew many Jewish turncoats resided there, and he devised an aggressive plan to storm the city, capture the infidels, and drag them into court.

Muhammed Ali in the days of his prime was the Champion of the World as a boxer. He often would go around saying very pridefully and with arrogance that he “was the greatest.” Truthfully, during his prime he was the greatest boxer.

One day, he was on an airplane which was getting ready to take off. The little lights start blinking to buckle your seatbelt and no smoking. The flight attendant was walking down the aisle and noticed that Muhammed Ali had not buckled his seatbelt and told him that he needed to.

Muhammed Ali said to her, “I’m superman and superman don’t need no seatbelt.”

The flight attendant shot back with, “Superman don’t need no airplane either, now buckle up!”

On the road to Damascus God took care of Paul’s pride. It is very hard for humans to admit when they are wrong. It took a bright light searing into Paul’s eyes, to the very core of his being to show him that he was wrong.

“And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth.” Acts 9:3. Suddenly God fires a shot across the bow of Saul’s nefarious plot.

Suddenly, God steps onto the scene and arrests your attention. It may come through the death of a child. In the hour of deepest grief, your life and family are impacted forever. Occasionally life’s unexpected turns come in the horrible crash of an airplane, causing a calamity that wipes out half the neighborhood. Or in the halting words of your physician as she admits, “Your biopsy isn’t good. Looks like malignancy.” Like a rogue wave, adversity crashes onto the peaceful shores of our lives and knocks us flat. Amazingly, the jolt awakens our senses and we suddenly remember that God is in control.

“Suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven.” To Agrippa he explained: “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” (Acts 26:13). This is no doubt the light of revelation to which Paul refers in 2 Cor. 4:6 as “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Christ is the glory of the Lord. He said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father”

(John 14:9). This is as truly a theophany—a manifestation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ—as was given to Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel, when they were called by God to their prophetic ministry. Saul had thought it ridiculous that Christians acclaimed a crucified and buried Messiah, but now Christ revealed Himself to Saul as the risen Lord, ascended to the heavenly realms.

He was now the Lord's prisoner. He was taken prisoner on his way to Damascus, where he was about to make prisoners of those who believed in the Lord. The Lord frequently arrests people in their career of sin, to bring them for a moment to a realization of their own helplessness, in order that they may see where they stand, and have a favorable opportunity to choose the way of life.

"And heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Acts 9:4. In other words, while Saul was hitting the church, Jesus has actually been feeling the punch! Paul later expounds in depth about the church as the body of Christ.

"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." Acts 9:5. Saul had not been at peace with his own mind, while persecuting the church of Christ. He had been pricked in his conscience. He had been under conviction that the doctrine he was seeking to root out was the truth, yet old prejudices derived from the instruction of the priests and doctors of the law, which had been his life study would not yield, and so time after time he had sought to banish these convictions by renewed zeal in persecution. In these efforts he was sincere, for he could not think that the priests and rulers and learned doctors were all wrong, and the despised sect of Nazarenes in the right; therefore he strove against the prickings of conscience as against the whisperings of Satan.

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife, enjoying his extended family. He would miss the paycheck, but he needed to retire. They could get by.

The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a favor. The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career.

When the carpenter finished his work the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "My gift to you!"

The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently.

So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock we realize we have to live in the house we have built.

Although kicking against the pricks (Acts 9:5), and endeavoring to silence the growing conviction that would force itself upon him as he witnessed the patience of the Christians, and heard their dying testimonies to the truth, Saul was not willfully stifling the voice of conscience. On the contrary, he was striving to preserve a good conscience, and so deeply had he been indoctrinated with the Pharisaic traditions, that he felt sure that these inconvenient prickings must be the suggestions of an evil spirit, which he was in duty bound to suppress. So the prickings of the Spirit of God had for a time only led him to redouble his zeal against the Christians.

Just as Saul was unconsciously persecuting the Lord, even so the Lord, without his recognizing the fact, was patiently giving him instruction all the time. The expression, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks," is an allusion to the way in which oxen were driven, namely, with a sharp goad. A stubborn ox would sometimes kick against the goad, but this only made his case the worse.

In the Hebrew language the word for "ox goad" is derived from a word meaning "to teach." It was with a sharp goad that the oxen were reminded of their duty, and taught the way they should go. Even so by the sharp conviction of the Holy Spirit, the Lord was seeking to teach Saul the right way, while Saul was stubbornly resisting. The Lord was pricking Saul's conscience to awaken him, because He had chosen him for a special work.

"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." Acts 9:6.

These were the words by which Saul, the persecutor of Jesus of Nazareth, showed his acknowledgment of that same Jesus as his Lord and Master, the one who had the right to command his service.

Up to the moment of his arrest while on the way to Damascus, Saul had been deliberately and persistently fighting against the Lord

Jesus. He knew the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and thought that he ought to do many thing contrary to it (Acts 26:9), which he also did; yet when, in response to his question, from the ground where he had been thrown, "Who art Thou, Lord?" the reply came, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest," immediately all thoughts of persecution vanished, and Saul at once acknowledged Jesus as Master.

What a marvelous change! Here was a man who for weeks and months had been possessed of but one thought, namely, to fight against Jesus of Nazareth, yet as soon as Jesus met him and said, "I am Jesus," instead of replying, "You're the one I'm after; I'm bound to exterminate your sect," he asked, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" as meekly as though he had never had any thought but to serve this Jesus. What could have effected this change?

The answer is plain: Saul had felt the hand of power upon him. Power such as he had never before experienced had laid hold on him, and he needed no one to tell him that it was supernatural. When the Spirit of God takes hold of a man, that man needs no formal introduction to the Spirit. When the Spirit sends strong conviction of sin, the man who a moment before might have been justifying himself, and might have been denying the existence of God, at once knows that it is the Spirit of God who is speaking to him, and he acknowledges the truth of what is said. So as soon as Saul learned that this Jesus whom he was persecuting was the one whose Spirit had seized him, he was as ready to serve as he had before been to persecute.

But while Saul was now a willing servant, he had not yet learned the conditions of service. His thought was of something that he should do, whereas the experience that he was even then passing through was intended to show him that it is the Lord who works with His servants, since His alone is the power. The Lord did not tell Saul what he should do, but told him instead to go and listen to what should be told him later.

Three days later the Lord sent Ananias to give Saul light. Ananias demurred, but the Lord overruled his objection, saying, "Go thy way; for he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel; for I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake." Acts 9:15, 16. The Lord did not say that He would show Saul how great things he must do for Him, but how great things he must *suffer*, or *experience* for



Him. This means not trouble merely, but joy as well; for the apostle learned that the suffering of tribulation means the sharing of joy.

Paul was “a chosen vessel,” to bear the name of the Lord. A vessel does not itself do anything; it receives and gives out what is put into it. The work is done by the one using the vessels. So the Apostle Paul, writing of the wondrous privileges of the servant of Christ, in ministering the Spirit, said, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” 2 Cor. 4:7.

It was a grand thing for Saul of Tarsus to say, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do;” for it showed that he recognized Jesus as his Master; but as he became acquainted with the Lord, he did not talk about what he had done or was to do. Although he could say in later life that he had labored “more abundantly” than all the other apostles, he did not fail to add, “Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

This is the language of every servant of Christ. “Not I, but Christ.” When Paul was asked, “What must I do to be saved?” he replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” This was in harmony with the words of Christ, who, in reply to the question of the Jews, “What shall we do that we might work the works of God?” said, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.” John 6:28, 29. Belief is not a substitute for work, but it is the work. Faith works, because it lays hold of the Word of God, which is “living, and active.”

It is God who works. If God had seen fit to correct Saul’s language, when he yielded himself as His servant, He might have said, “What you are to do is to let Me do what I will.” Our highest prayer is, “Thy will be done.” God accepted Saul’s tender of service without any reference to the language, because it was sincere. His only desire was that God should be glorified in him, no matter how.

And think of the wondrous possibilities before the one who thus yields himself to God! Nothing is too hard for the Lord. All we have to do is to settle two things. First, whose we are, and second, His power. If we know that we belong to the Lord, so that He alone has the right to control us, and we have no voice in the matter, for we are not our own, and then realize that He is Almighty, there is no limit to what God can do with us. And so long as we remember that we are His, and that we have no power to do anything, being only vessels for the Master’s use, we shall not become vain-glorious over the great things God may do with us.

And then there was Chuck. Known by many in the political world of the late 1960s and early 1970s as Nixon's hatchet man, Chuck Colson performed the behind-the-scenes dirty work for his friend and boss, Richard Nixon. Someone said in an unguarded moment, "Chuck's the kind of guy who would run over his grandmother if necessary to get the job done." After an unbelievably rapid ascent to political power and stature, and reeling from the pain of a failed marriage, Colson reached a crisis point in his life where, he too, was enduring only misery and emptiness. As the Watergate tangle intensified, Colson descended deep into despair. He began to search for peace in his heart.

By late 1972 even the indomitable Chuck Colson began to buckle. He was tired. Nixon was forever calling him at odd hours, summoning him to the Oval Office to talk over this or go over that. When Nixon was reelected in November of that year, Colson resigned as Special Counsel to the President and longed to retreat into private life. But the web of Watergate only tightened its hold.

In *Born Again* he recounted the story of his dramatic conversion. He had been visiting the home of friend and colleague Tom Phillips, who had been converted at a Billy Graham crusade. Phillips had confronted Colson with the gospel and read him a portion from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* that stuck with him: "A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." That summer evening in August 1973, Tom Phillips asked Chuck Colson if he would like to pray with him. Colson, aching inside but hard on the outside, awkwardly agreed. "Sure—I guess I would—fine." He felt the inner movement of the Spirit but did not cough up the words of surrender.

Later that night, "outside in the dark [sitting in the car], the iron grip I'd kept on my emotions began to relax. Tears welled up in my eyes. . . and suddenly I knew I had to go back into the house and pray with Tom." Only Tom had already gone to bed. Colson parked along the roadside and hoped his friend couldn't hear him sobbing.

Phillips connected Colson with Doug Coe, National Prayer Breakfast organizer and a Christian networker inside the Beltway. Coe tried to convince the believers in Colson's political camp of the authenticity of his conversion, to no avail. As a last resort, Coe contacted Harold Hughes, the well-known Democratic Senator and outspoken Christian. Coe recounted at the Founder's Dinner, "I called Senator Harold

Hughes and said, ‘Senator, I have a friend who is in tremendous need and needs a friend. I was wondering if you could meet with him and maybe help him along with the Lord.’ When Hughes learned this friend was Colson, he uttered a stream of curses and hung up on Coe.

An hour later, the phone rang. The senator was on the other end. “I’m sorry. I know that’s not what Jesus would want me to do. If you’ll forgive me, I’ll meet him. But it has to be after eight o’clock at night. And it has to be out in the countryside.” At this stage of his Christian life, Colson had never prayed aloud and had not finessed the art of Christian testimonials. Hughes was understandably skeptical. He asked Colson to tell him about his newfound faith. In halting gestures, Nixon’s onetime hatchet man made his confession. After twenty minutes, Coe said, Hughes got up, walked across the room, and embraced Colson. “We are brothers for life,” he said.

Another glorious conversion of a notorious sinner. It happens all the time: to dogmatic atheists and determined agnostics; to bright young physicians and brilliant scientists; to popular coaches and gifted athletes; to famous musicians and renowned artists; to former criminals and current pastors. One by one, these unique individuals get to the end of life’s rope and, when faced with the claims of the gospel, they believe. Their lives, in a matter of moments, are transformed.

Remember that the greatest thing that God can do with any one is to work righteousness through him; and righteousness is humility. If we continually acknowledge that we are the Lord’s, and know that what He wants us to do is what He will do in us, we shall be kept from sin; for He will work in us, and in Him is no sin.

Doesn’t it follow as plain as the day, that he who once for all, and always, acknowledges that he belongs to the Lord, for the Lord to do with him as He will, must be righteous to eternity? Settle it then, to whom you belong, and if you decide that you belong to God, which is the fact, your whole future is clear. Only one thing would God have you do, and that is to acknowledge that you are His, and to adhere to it. Whose are you?