

Jesus' Encounter with a Persecuting Enemy

Acts 7:57-60; 8:1-3 [NIV] *“At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. **Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.” ... “And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”*

Saul [renamed Paul – **Acts 13:9**] condoned the murder of Stephen and persecuted the early Christian church, flinging many Christians into prison.

Why did Paul hate Christians so much?

Saul had been a very religious man.

Philippians 3:5-6 [NIV] *“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”*

He was a good Pharisee, who knew the Bible [Old Testament] very well and sincerely believed that the Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism.

Therefore Saul hated the Christian faith and persecuted Christians without mercy.

Acts 9:1-2 [NIV] *“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.”*

Saul in his zeal was going beyond all reason to destroy the young Christian church.

Acts 26:9-11 [NIV] *“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 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.”*

Causing Christians to be put in prison and murdered. Saul was obsessed with this desire to destroy Christianity, based on his religious belief.

What changed this life of hating Christians into a life that was devoted to serving and encouraging Christians?

Paul's changed life that caused many to turn to Christ during his physical life and millions since his death through his letters to the churches he founded.

A dramatic personal meeting with Christ.

Acts 9:3-6 [NIV] *“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute*

me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Very personal and very dramatic.

Acts 22:11-16 [NIV] *"My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'"*

Called to join the disciples who had lived for over 3 years with Jesus Christ before His death. Listening to the teaching that Jesus Christ gave to all who followed Him.

Acts 26:12-18 [NIV] *"On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O King, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. **I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.**"*

Saul [Hebrew "asked for"] then renamed Paul [Greek "small"] sent to "open their eyes" – **God blinded Saul and humbled him then sent him to open the eyes of others to what Jesus Christ, whom He persecuted, has done for all humanity.**

Galatians 1:17-18 [NIV] *"nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days."*

Before Paul could do this great work for God, he had to spend time with Jesus Christ and listen to His words.

God did not waste any part of Paul.

Paul's background, his training, his citizenship, his mind, even his weaknesses.

We have to ask the question, 'Are we willing to let God do the same with us?'

Romans 12:1 [NIV] *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship."*

We will never know all that God can do with us to assist in His mission to all humanity until we, like Paul, offer all we have to use as He wishes.

What can we learn from Paul's life and writings?

The good news is that even enemies of God can receive forgiveness and eternal life as a gift of God's Grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Obedience results from a relationship with Jesus Christ, but obedience to a set of laws will never create or earn that relationship.

Real freedom does not come until we no longer have to prove our freedom.

God does not waste any part of our life, He will use our past and present so we may serve Him in our future.

Philippians 3:7-13 [NIV] *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,”*

Paul’s goal in life after his meeting with Jesus Christ is the perfect example for all of us to follow.