

## “The Saul Side of Paul”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 8/30/2020  
Text: Acts 8:1-3 at FBC of Newport, NH

*//And Saul approved of their killing him.*

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.//*

—Acts 8:1-3 (NIV)

Twice now Saul is mentioned by Luke as being there at the martyrdom of Stephen. First he mentions that Saul was young and only holding the coats of those who were throwing the stones. But this is not to excuse or distance Saul from what’s happening. In the second reference he makes it clear that Saul approved of this killing. He thinks such drastic action is justified and necessary. He believes this new sect is dangerous, blasphemous, centered on a false messiah and therefore is incompatible with Judaism.

We know why Luke makes this mention. He is introducing the man who will go on in chapter 9 to become a believer in the very One he persecutes and whom Stephen points to while dying. But for now such a thought, such a conversion, is unthinkable to anyone living at that time—believer or unbeliever. No one could see this young man’s future as anything other than that of a man whose talents, skills and zealous devotion to Judaism would enable him to put away this following of Jesus once and for all. Any scenario opposite to that would be impossible for anyone to take seriously. Anyone.

Anyone except God, that is. And God is the only exception needed to make everyone else’s idea of impossible to become a reality. But until God intervenes in chapter nine and turns this coat-checker at an execution into the Apostle Paul, let us look at Saul and his circumstances before his “close encounter of the third kind” with the risen Jesus of Nazareth.

I’m going to just quote from Bruce Gore’s **Historical and Chronological Context of the Bible**, rather than paraphrase it. For he’s quite economical in his words. He describes Saul this way:

*The young firebrand who presided over the murder of Stephen was one of the most brilliant and energetic men in Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus. He had been born a Jewish Roman citizen in a major commercial center not far from the Bay of Issus on the Mediterranean, and was from a family of means that followed the most strict form of the Jewish religion. At an early age Saul had been sent to Jerusalem and provided the finest education available, culminating in studies at the school of Gamaliel, one of the most respected*

*rabbis and scholars in the world. ...*

*Saul graduated at the head of his class, possessing both rare academic genius as well as a passionate zeal for the most exacting form of Jewish faith and practice. Even as a young man he was well known, and had distinguished himself as an exceptional “rising star” in the Jewish world.*

—Gore, HCCB, chapter 11-33

Gore, like our scripture text, goes on to say that Saul and others sought to rid Jerusalem and the surrounding regions of anything having to do with Jesus of Nazareth. The killing of Stephen was just the first breakthrough to that end. After this, the persecution was so severe that the average believer was largely driven out of Jerusalem and pursued in the surrounding regions. Only a core group was left, centering around the Twelve Apostles.

What strikes me in all this is just how *right* Saul must have felt, and how wrong he was, at Stephen’s death and the subsequent persecution he directed and personally carried out against the infant Church. Yet, we, as believers, know Saul. We’re not used to thinking of him as being dead wrong. We know him as Paul, one of the greatest Apostles and servants of Christ. He has touched countless numbers of lives over two thousand years of influence from his letters to first century churches. He has undoubtedly touched our lives right here today.

Yet this man, at the beginning of his notable life, was of a fully persuaded mind to destroy everything about Jesus Christ and the Church. If we had met him back then, we would surely have been tempted to hate him. We would have found arguing with him to be frustrating and maybe think of him as a lost cause. We would have found him to be more and more dangerous as his influence and power grew around him. He would have hated you and approved of your death and would have personally thrown you in prison for the simple fact of your believing in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world. The name: “Saul of Tarsus” would be violently opposed to the name: “Jesus of Nazareth.”

The first century church feared the name Saul. Knowing what that man did *for* the Church in service to Christ, it’s not hard to imagine why he was feared when he was commissioned by the world to *extinguish* the Church. He was not one to go at something half-hearted.

I would like to make a distinction about Saul though. As close as he might have seemed to being an anti-christ figure (in his antichristian zeal if not in his political position), Saul had not actually given his heart over to Satan. He was indeed serving Satan, like a German soldier in the German army under Hitler. But his zeal was not that of the indoctrinated Nazi. His mission was not like that of Judas, whom Satan entered for carrying out the final act against Christ. Paul himself reflected back on this years later, when he was writing to his apprentice Timothy. And I’d like to quote him at length here too, as he is not only economical in his words, he is most inspiring, impossible to improve upon:

*12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy **because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.** 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

—1 Timothy 1:12-17

If Saul had acted with sure knowledge and actual hatred for Jesus Christ, instead of ignorance and misplaced passion, then his fate would have been sealed. For he would not have been acting in the “ignorance and unbelief” against Jesus that may be forgiven. He would have been acting against the Holy Spirit directly and defiantly. Of this Jesus said: “*Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*” (Matthew 12:32) This is an important point to keep in mind regarding Saul as he is so deeply mixed in with a long listing of persecutors of the Church.

I’m not saying Saul was deep down a good guy and so it was natural for God to save him so radically. No. Saul, as he says himself, was a terrible man, “the worst of sinners.” But he hadn’t embraced being the worst; he wasn’t even aware of it. In fact, he probably thought he was one of the best of God’s people. But he was far from it. Only by encountering Jesus for himself would he learn the truth: the truth about his real Savior and the truth about his real sin. And he would speak for us all when he would write to the Romans believers, saying, “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Until then, though, Saul lived as a persecutor of God’s Son, the Savior of the likes of Saul.

Remember this Saul side of Paul when you are dealing with the most critical and even violent opponents of the Faith. For two reasons. One: this person could possibly be saved by Christ and become a brother or sister in the Church, even a leader some day. And Two: if we’re not careful, we could slip into playing the role of Saul where we think it’s our duty to reciprocate against this person and persecute him. Thinking it’s okay because we’re in the right. Look, Jesus was in the right more than anyone else on earth could be in the right. And he did not use that to be an instrument of God’s judgment and wrath. OK, he did have some harsh words for some who seemed to be on the event horizon of hell. And he did cleanse the temple. But he never did call the Church to follow him in those ways. Those were more directly matters between them and God. Our calling is to preach the Good News to sinners just as sinful as we are, or even as terrible as the Apostle Paul.