

# Meet Saul, Not Yet Paul

## The Life and Ministry of Paul—part 1

June 26, 2016

### **DAY 1: Meet Saul, Not Yet Paul**

1. We begin a study of the apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus.
2. It's easy to idealize Paul. After all he was the author of thirteen epistles, including one of the greatest books ever written, the book of Romans. He was a missionary, church planter, ministry team leader, and known as the "apostle to the Gentiles."
3. What's shocking is to remember his roots! He was previously one of the most ferocious enemies of Jesus Christ's followers that ever lived! He not only arrested them, but put them to death, including cold blooded murder.

4. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was testifying to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders of the day.

*Acts 6:8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*

*Acts 6:10 ... but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.*

*Acts 6:15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

5. But the Jewish leaders became incensed at his message.

*Acts 7:54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.*

<sup>55</sup> *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

<sup>56</sup> *"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

*Acts 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> 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.*

<sup>59</sup> *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

<sup>60</sup> *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.*

*Acts 8:1 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.*

6. There are times in life when we wonder if we've run too far away from God. "Could God forgive somebody as evil as I've been?"
7. What strikes you that God could not only save Saul, but transform him into a hero of the faith?

## DAY 2: The Rise of Christianity

1. Thousands of Jews were becoming Christians, incensing the Jewish authorities. A “strange” pattern began to develop. The more the Jewish authorities tried to snuff out Christianity the greater the explosion of Christian growth!

*Acts 5:17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.*

2. The attempts to squash burgeoning Christianity included killing Jesus, making sure the tomb was guarded so the body could not be stolen. They attempted to silence the spokesmen by arresting, flogging, and jailing them.

*Acts 5:29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"*

<sup>30</sup> *The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.*

<sup>31</sup> *God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.*

<sup>32</sup> *We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

<sup>33</sup> *When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.*

3. Saul heard that speech! Think how incensed he must have been! Peter was an uneducated, blue-collar fisherman. Jesus was thought to be a dead fraud who claimed to be God. But God intervened through a Jewish man named Gamaliel, convincing the leaders of the Sanhedrin that if God was behind this movement, all their efforts would be in vain.

*Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

<sup>42</sup> *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*

4. How enraged was Saul at the rise of these unlearned men and the frustrations of being unable to stop them? Listen to his own testimony, recited years later...

*Acts 26:10 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.*

<sup>11</sup> *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.*

*Acts 8:3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*

5. What strikes you from today's devotional?

### **DAY 3: The Road to a New Life**

1. Millions and millions of people have become Christians. Some conversion stories are calm and thought-filled, while others are dramatic and “never-saw-THAT-coming” events.

2. We pick up Saul’s story when he was on his way to Damascus in another pursuit of Christians!

*Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest*

*<sup>2</sup> 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.*

3. Damascus is about one hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Saul’s fury at the explosive growth of Christianity had grown to hot-fever pitch. He was on a mission of death.

*Acts 9:3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground ...*

4. Saul had been a proud, stubborn, self-reliant lion. Suddenly he is on the ground in the dust. The light is so blinding that he can’t see a thing. Then he realizes he *is* blind! In the next moment he hears a loud voice.

*Acts 9:4b ...and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

5. Saul is dumbfounded and confused. Whose voice is this? What is this blinding light?

*Acts 9:5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

6. Put yourself in Saul’s shoes. For several years, Saul thought he was persecuting Christians, these “weird” people who left Judaism for some obscure savior. Their message was that this savior had risen from the dead and had been seen by individuals, small groups of people, and by five hundred people at one time.

7. He begins to realize the following:

a. This savior was not dead but very much alive!

b. This savior called Saul by name, and knew everything Saul had done!

c. Saul had not just been persecuting Christians, but he had also been persecuting this savior!

8. If you were Saul, what would you have expected to happen next? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Why didn’t judgment fall on Saul?

#### **DAY 4: The Road to a New Life (continued)**

*Acts 9:4b ...and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

*Acts 9:5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

1. Saul continued to realize more!

a. This Jesus was not just some obscure man, but God in the flesh!

b. Saul must have wondered why judgment didn't fall on him. The flash of lightning that blinded him could just as easily have been a bolt of lightning that killed him!

c. Why didn't judgment fall right then?

2. Years later, Paul answers this question, in part, to his protégé, Timothy.

*1 Timothy 1:13 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.*

3. Consider the magnitude of all that happened at that moment. Saul has been:

a. Heading in the exact wrong direction,

b. Believing in the absolute wrong things,

c. Acting in complete wickedness, and

d. **Convinced** that all of the above was God's great purpose for him!

3. As you think about your life, do you find a similar pride in you that "assures" you that the direction you're heading, what you're believing, and how you're acting can be just as wrong as wrong can be?

4. It's possible for us as Christians, to head off in a bad direction, to justify immoral behavior, and to believe things contrary to God's word. No one is immune from these temptations.

5. It is imperative that we be yielded to God, and humble to our brother and sisters in Christ who can help us moving forward!

6. Is your heart humble toward God? Are you open to getting feedback to brothers/sisters?

## **DAY 5: Kicking against God's goads.**

1. Years later, Paul adds a fascinating detail that Luke (who wrote Acts) did not include in chapter 9. Paul is sharing his conversion story with King Agrippa. When Jesus confronts Saul on the road to Damascus, He also asks Saul this question...

*Acts 26:14 "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."*

2. A "goad" was a piece of wood with a sharpened point. A farmer could use it to get a stubborn mule or ox moving by poking it with the goad. Some goads were attached to a wagon, just behind where an ox or mule would sometimes kick against the wagon. The mule soon learned that kicking against the wagon was a bad idea as the sharpened stakes poked into their tender calf muscles!

3. This is the image Jesus uses to tell Saul, that he has been doing the same thing! But instead of kicking against a wagon with sharpened stakes, Saul had been kicking against God's goads!

4. What are some of the goads to which Saul had been kicking? Here are a few we know:

a. Saul had heard the preaching of the early apostles and rejected it outright as foolishness!

b. It is certain that Saul heard the testimony of some of the very Christians he arrested!

c. It is doubtful that Saul could have erased from his memory banks the young Stephen, who faced his own martyrdom with peace and the courage to continue to speak until he could speak no more.

d. How could Stephen PRAY for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him to death?!?!

5. God still uses goads today! It's possible to be foolish enough to kick against them!

a. Are you obeying what you know to be the revealed will of God?

b. Are you trying to live a life of faith straddling God's fence, with one foot doing what you want to do and the other foot doing what God wants you to do?

c. Are you regularly in God's word, seeking Him, yielding your heart to Him?

6. As we finish this week, I am dumb-founded at how long-suffering God had been with Saul. While we can admire God's mercy for each of us, we must also remember that there are times when God will use more stern measures to get our attention, change our direction, and move us toward obedience. **YOU DON'T HAVE TO KICK AGAINST GOAD!**