

When God's Ways Shake Us—part 3

Saul: Distort and Deny

(The counterfeit gospel)

March 22, 2026

DAY 1: Who was Saul of Tarsus?

1. When God's ways shake us, we usually scramble with our faith, to either
 - a. **Resist** God and **run** from God (like Jonah), or,
 - b. **Distort** God's word and **deny** the parts we don't like (like Saul of Tarsus).

2. Saul was born in Tarsus, a prosperous city, with a university-type culture, in the fertile region of Celicia.
 - a. His family was likely well-to-do.
 - b. He was a Roman citizen by birth, but a religious Jew, and proud of it.
 - c. He was tutored by a rabbi named Gamaliel, the most well-known and respected rabbi of his day.

3. We first meet Saul in the book of Acts while Stephen was preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders though Stephen was a heretic and began to stone him, eventually killing him.

*Acts 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats **at the feet of a young man named Saul.***

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ 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 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.***

4. What conclusions did he make about these early Christians?

5. What allowed him to justify leading such violent persecution against them?

DAY 2: Building a life on who he imagined he was and what he did

1. Saul of Tarsus had a name change after his conversion to Christ. From then on Saul was known as Paul.

Philippians 3:3 ...we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

*If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵ 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; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

2. Before Paul converted to Christ, this is his testimony about what mattered most to him, how he wanted to view himself, and how he was driven to have his personal and professional needs met. What strikes you from Paul’s previous bio in Phil. 3:3-6?

3. When Paul was being prosecuted by a king, this was part of his testimony about himself:

Acts 22:2 ... Then Paul said: ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

4. All of us build a life that has to do with meeting our needs as our top priority. Pride is the real driver behind all of this. Some of those needs include:

Sense of importance	Our perceived value	Security
Love	Pleasure	Success
Being cared for	Appreciated	Being heard
Making a difference	Knowing your life matters, etc.	

4. Look back on the verses in today’s study. On what bases did Paul construct his life and think about his life in an effort to establish his self-importance, his value, his personal needs?

5. All of us are constantly pursuing those same kinds of needs every day, even when we aren’t aware of it. Which of these needs most resonates with you?

6. As you think about your life how do you go about seeking to get those needs met?

DAY 3: The God who does good to us, as He defines good

1. We all construct a life that is designed to meet our deepest relational and personal needs, as we define our “needs.”

2. We naturally assume that God’s job is to enable our plans for our fulfillment to come to fruition. We assume that the “abundant life” is the “blessed life,” the “easier life,” the “comfortable life,” etc.

3. We call God “good” when He cooperates with (1) meeting our needs, (2) the way we want them met, and (3) in our timing.

4. But God’s definition of “good” is different than our definition. His priority is making us good as He defines good—by transforming us into the character and likeness of Jesus Christ!

*Romans 8:28 We know that in everything **God works for good** with those who love Him, who are called according to **His** purpose.*

5. The word “good” is the key word. Do we understand good as He means it or how we want it to be? It is not the pleasant life we call good. Look how Paul continues this thought in the very next verse!

*Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

6. God’s purpose is to form us into the likeness of His Son. That is the good to which God is always working!

7. God’s top priorities in our lives is NOT to make us comfortable, convenient, “smooth,” immediately pleasurable and satisfying. His top priority is our character formation, from the inside out.

8. What strikes you from today’s devotional? When God’s ways shake us, what questions do you ask God? Or yourself?

9. What is God trying to build in you?

DAY 4: Denying and distorting God's good news

John 10:10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

1. Abundant life has a cultural connotation of having an abundant life of blessings we want substantially in *this* life. While we will be blessed with some blessings, God gets to determine the blessings He wants to give us, not us.

2. We will fully enjoy all of God's blessings in heaven, but not fully in this life!

3. "We have disfigured the gospel for today's entitled Christians into the good news of God's provision of abundant reasons to live most days with a sunny smile and no flirting with despair, to sing worship music full of upbeat praise with little room for lament." – Larry Crabb

4. We assume we best represent God to others when we do so with a "chipper attitude." We do have reason to have a joyful attitude even when discouraged. But that is not because of the promises of God that guarantee life the way we want it. It's easy to skew the gospel to mean that bad things don't happen to people like us.

5. After Saul's conversion to Christ, he was sent to a man named Ananias. God told Ananias to go visit Paul.

*Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him **how much he must suffer for my name.**"*

6. As Paul was approaching the end of his life and ministry, notice how he looked back on his life.

2 Tim. 3:10 You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

7. If we assume that the good news of the gospel is means to give us the life of blessing as we define them, when God's ways shake us, we will work hard to deny the real message of the gospel good news and distort it to "fit" how we want to define our lives.

8. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 5: The supremacy of knowing Christ!

1. All that Saul had accomplished ended up leading him to regret, emptiness, and misery. His story parallels that of King Solomon. Solomon had tried to fill himself through achievements in the financial and physical and sexual world, Saul had tried to fill himself through achievements in the personal and religious world.

2. But at Saul's conversion to Christ all of that dramatically changed!

Philippians 3:7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ 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 on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

3. How did Paul view his past achievements?

4. What was the real treasure?

5. What kind of man could he now see himself becoming? (Look at v. 9).

6. What was it about Christ that Paul sees?

7. When we come to the bible, let us come with humility and a teachable heart to obey what it says for Jesus' sake instead of distorting and denying the parts of the bible that don't fit what we want.

“**Distort** what you read in the Bible to fit your preconceived ideas; **deny** whatever you find in the Bible that strikes you as bad news; just don't think about it. Given your cultural background, you prewired temperament, and your fallen inclination to mangle God's thoughts to better match yours, you can be on your way to coming up with a counterfeit gospel that supports the way you naturally want to live.” – Larry Crabb