

TUTORIAL
2.15

Saul the persecutor becomes Saul the Apostle

This tutorial looks at the way Saul, a Jewish persecutor of the Church, was given a specific role in God's plans through a personal meeting with the Lord Jesus.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 7:58, Acts chapters 8 and 9.**

Last time

Luke's Narrative described a controversy that came up in the early Church between two groups with different cultural backgrounds. God's Spirit guided the Apostles to recognize a team of leaders - Deacons - within the group who would focus on practical service for the Church. This left the Apostles free to lead in other ways related directly to prayer and teaching God's Word. The Jewish authorities arrested one of the new leaders, Stephen. His speech inflamed their hatred further and they put him to death by ritual stoning.

Saul, a key player in Acts, comes on stage

Luke now focuses on an individual who, apart from God Himself, will prove to be the key player in the rest of the Acts account. A young man is watching the execution of Stephen with approval. He believes this new Jesus sect must be stamped out. There's no indication that he actually participates in the brutal killing himself, but he's associated with those who do and he's looking after their coats for them (Acts 7:58 and 8:1) Luke refers to him here early on by his Hebrew name, Saul, but later he'll go exclusively by Paul, which is the Roman equivalent. These two names - as we'll find out later in the Narrative - reflect the layers of Paul's identity and formative influences. A Roman citizen by birth, he is from a Jewish family that settled many years ago in the city of Tarsus - an important trade centre on the Mediterranean coast of modern day Turkey. He's been indoctrinated into orthodox Pharisaical Judaism, but he's also had a classic Greek education perhaps including Stoic philosophy.

It's worth noting in passing here how God equips people, even before they know Him, for roles that He will later give them opportunity to take on. Paul, as we'll see, was incredibly well suited for the part God is about to offer to him in

the outward reach of the Church. But for the moment, in Jerusalem, Saul is clearly considered by the orthodox Jewish leaders to be a young man with enormous potential.

The new Church suffers violent persecution

The events surrounding Stephen's death prove to be the initial earthquake that unleashes a tsunami of violent opposition against the Church (Acts 8:1-3). The Apostles stay put for now, but many of the believers leave Jerusalem to escape the tide of persecution...scattering to the outlying regions. Jesus had told the Apostles that they - His followers - were to be His witnesses first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria and to the world beyond. Now He's allowing circumstances to help them fulfill those instructions. Because, wherever they went, Luke records, they were sharing the Good News about Jesus. Here again we see God seamlessly weaving the smaller individual narratives of His image-bearers into His one Great Narrative.

Only a truly sovereign God could allow circumstances to affect His people without negating the genuine partnership He's eagerly seeking with them. As Jesus had clearly explained and modelled, participation in God's purpose of redeeming, or buying back, His lost race always involves cost.

The leaders of the Church in Jerusalem have already gladly accepted harassment, imprisonment, beating and, in Stephen's case, death, for the sake of their Lord. Now the rest of the group are having their commitment to Him and His Cause put to the test. Will they prioritize the reward of Jesus' loving approval that Stephen experienced so vividly at his death, or will they allow fear and even what many might call 'legitimate concerns' to shape their lives? It's a question that, in one form or another, God's Spirit poses to all those who claim to be Jesus' disciples...now just as much as then. Taking the lead in the persecution of the Church is the young zealous fundamentalist, Saul - he's determined to hunt down these followers of Jesus wherever they're holed up. This movement, this Jesus sect, must be stamped out once and for all. He's tireless in tracking them down and bringing them back to face punishment in Jerusalem.

The Gospel goes to Samaria and further afield

At this point in the Acts account (Acts 8:4-40), Luke takes a brief detour from following Saul's story to describe two incidents. They both involve one of the deacons from the Jerusalem church, Philip, who like many has been driven out of the city by the persecution after the death of his co-worker, Stephen. We won't take time to focus on Philip's experiences here, but they will prove to be very significant in the expansion of the Church. The first finds Philip sharing the Good News in Samaria, with the result that a large number of people put their faith in Jesus as the Christ.

In the second incident, the Spirit of God gives Philip the opportunity to help a Jewish proselyte from Ethiopia understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Narrative. The salvation of people from the theologically and ethnically aberrant Samaria, and now someone from an entirely non-Jewish people group, are important signposts of the ethnic inclusiveness inherent in the New Covenant.

Saul meets Jesus on the way to Damascus

But back to Saul...motivated by religious fervor and, no doubt, ambition, he gets authority from the High Priest to travel the 200 or so kilometers north to Damascus (Acts 9:1-3). Renowned as the oldest inhabited city in the world, it was the capital of the Roman province and modern day nation of Syria. It also seems to have been quite an active centre for Jesus' followers in the early days as the Church is moving out from Jerusalem. And so Saul heads there with a group of armed men to hunt down as many as he can and drag them back to Jerusalem "in chains", the text says. Paul and his group are getting close to Damascus when the famous events unfold that lead to his conversion.

Suddenly, dramatically, the self-righteous assurance of this young man is shattered (Acts 9:3-9).

The Son of God, the Expression of the Creator in human form, the Word, in all the glory and authority of His existence in God's place as the Lamb-who-died-and-rose-again...Jesus, speaks His name, "Saul, Saul. Why are you persecuting me?" He says, *persecuting me*...although the oppression of His followers is effectively pushing them out into needy communities, just as Jesus intended, that doesn't mean He doesn't care about what they're going through. For Him, this is a very personal thing. What His Body experiences, impacts Him directly. No mistreatment of His blood-bought children goes unnoticed or, ultimately, unpunished.

The encounter with God's Son is a shattering blow to Saul's confident worldview assumptions... instead of doing things that will please God, as he thought, he's actually set himself up as the enemy of God. Blind, humbled, chastened by his encounter with Jesus, he is led into Damascus... to wait for instructions, he's told. Lying in the darkness for the next three days, unable to eat or drink, he must be wondering what the future holds. He calls out to God, to His Son, to help him make sense of things...to tell him what to do next. What he doesn't know yet is that he's going to be given an amazing opportunity to serve the One he's been persecuting. While he's been hunting down the believers, God has been hunting him down. Now He's going to graciously give him a real purpose in life.

Ananias tells Saul about his new role

Luke introduces us to Ananias, a believer living in Damascus, who the Lord chooses to play a role in recruiting Saul to His global Cause (Acts 9:10-16).

Ananias' appearance in the Narrative is very minor compared with the prominent part Saul will have, but that doesn't mean he contributes less or that his efforts are not just as valuable to the Lord. Much of the sacrifice and effort that's made for the Lord and His Church happen out of the limelight, with little or no public recognition. The encouragement to continue lies in the fact that the Master always notices and deeply appreciates the efforts of His people for Him and His Purpose.

Ananias is not exactly eager when the Lord tells him to go and speak on His behalf to Saul...*don't you know what a scary man this is, Lord?* But here's more evidence of God's commitment to involving His people in His purposes. As with Moses, the disciples, and many believers since, God's choice is not shaped by Ananias' own confidence or innate ability. In fact, as Saul himself will come to understand and articulate, God chooses ministry partners who are willing to rely on Him to overcome their own fear and shortcomings...because that way His power and wisdom is demonstrated most clearly. Although God does want us, His co-workers, to walk with Him by faith, even when we don't see the whole picture of what lies ahead, He isn't just after blind, mindless obedience. We've seen how Jesus, and now the Holy Spirit, work to draw faithful followers into a clear-eyed understanding of God's plans. So now He gives Ananias a glimpse of why it's so important that he puts aside his fears and goes to speak to Saul.

The Lord explains that He has chosen Saul to be one of His storytellers, His messengers. He'll have incredible opportunities to share the Message with his own Jewish people, but also to the non-Jewish ethnic groups, and to rulers. But as we've already noted, following the One who gave everything always costs the follower. Saul is also going to suffer for the sake of Jesus' name. Despite any lingering misgivings, Ananias gets up and goes to the house where God has told him that Saul is staying...on the road known as Via Recta or Straight Street in English that dissects the ancient city (Acts 9:17-19). It's still there today, mostly covered and part of a market in Damascus. Ananias introduces himself to his new brother in the faith, and Saul is immediately able to see again.

The former persecutor is persecuted

With his strength beginning to return, it's only a matter of days before Saul is going around to the local Jewish meeting places - their synagogues - trying to convince people that Jesus truly is the Son of God (Acts 9:20-30). Of course people are shocked to hear this from the young man, formerly the most orthodox of Jews and violently opposed to the Jesus sect.

Saul continues to learn from God's Spirit how to put forward powerful, convincing arguments from the Old Testament which, of course, he knows thoroughly from his studies under the Pharisees. The former enforcer for the orthodox Jewish authorities now becomes a target himself. Plans are made to

murder him. They keep watch by the city gates to get him if he tries to leave. When this plot becomes known, a plan is devised to get Saul out...the same people he had come to the city to arrest now help him avoid capture by lowering him over the city wall in a large basket. Luke records that Saul makes his way back to Jerusalem. After some initial - and very understandable - suspicion on the part of the believers there, he's eventually introduced to the apostles and accepted as a brother in the faith. His very bold witness for Jesus in the capital results in an attempt on his life by the same Greek speaking, or Hellenized, Jews who'd played such a large part in Stephen's death. He leaves and heads off, probably by ship, to his hometown of Tarsus, the capital city in the Roman province of Cilicia.

Luke notes that these events mark a return to a time of peace for the Church, which now has a major presence in Jerusalem and surrounding provinces, in Galilee and in Samaria (Acts 9:31-32). Jesus' Plan for His Ecclesia to reach out from its initial small beginnings is moving forward. No longer isolated to one community, His Body, under the Spirit's guidance and encouragement is growing in numbers and spiritual strength where it is represented in different areas.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Can you identify some ways that you believe God has equipped you, particularly in your formative years, for serving Him and His Church? If so, does that result at all in a sense of responsibility on your part to use your life in some specific way? If you could have a verbal conversation with Jesus about this issue, what do you think He might say to you?
2. What do you think about Jesus allowing persecution to come on His people to further His objectives? Do you feel that persecution would be a positive thing for your church to experience? Please explain. Is it legitimate to thank God, as is often done, for the freedom we have to meet openly without fear of reprisal?