

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Week 14 Bible Study: Who Was Saul of Tarsus?

Preparing for the Damascus Road

Introduction:

Last week we watched the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem through the scattering of the Church. Philip proclaimed Christ in Samaria, the Ethiopian eunuch believed the gospel, and the good news continued moving toward the ends of the earth.

As Acts 9 begins, Luke returns to a man we have only seen briefly up to this point: **Saul of Tarsus.**

Before we walk with Saul on the Damascus Road this Sunday, let's take time to understand who he was before he met Jesus.

1. Saul the Scholar

Read

- Acts 22:3-5
 - *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished."*
- Philippians 3:4-6

- *“though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”*

What do these passages tell us about Saul?

- Born in Tarsus
- Educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel
- A Pharisee
- A Hebrew of Hebrews
- Zealous for the Law
- Advancing beyond many of his contemporaries
- Blameless according to the righteousness of the Law

Discussion

What kind of man does Saul appear to have been?

2. Saul the Zealot

Read

- **Galatians 1:13-14**
 - *“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”*

Saul was not indifferent toward God.

He sincerely believed he was defending the faith of Israel and protecting God's people from dangerous false teaching.

Discussion

What motivated Saul to oppose the followers of Jesus so fiercely?

3. Saul the Persecutor

Read

- **Acts 8:1-3**
 - *“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*
- **Acts 26:9-11**
 - *“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”*

When we put these passages together, we discover that Saul:

- Approved of Stephen's execution.
- Ravaged the Church.
- Entered homes and dragged away believers.

- Imprisoned men and women.
- Cast his vote against Christians.
- Tried to force believers to blaspheme.
- Pursued Christians even into foreign cities.

Discussion

If you had known Saul before Acts 9, what odds would you give of him ever giving up his life in Judaism and becoming a follower of Christ?

4. The Man We Meet in Acts 9

Read

- **Acts 9:1-2**
 - *“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”*

Luke introduces Saul as a man still "breathing threats and murder" against the disciples of the Lord.

He is not searching for Jesus. He is searching for Christians.

The believers in Damascus had already heard about Saul's persecution and knew he had come with authority from the high priest to arrest those who belonged to "the Way."

Discussion

If you had been one of the believers in Damascus, how do you think you would have responded after hearing Saul was coming?

Looking in the Mirror

Saul was:

- deeply religious.
- highly educated.
- morally disciplined.
- passionately devoted to what he believed.
- completely sincere.

Yet he was sincerely wrong.

- His greatest problem was not a lack of intelligence.
- His greatest problem was not a lack of zeal.
- His greatest problem was that he did not yet know Jesus for who He truly was.

Every one of us has been shaped by influences such as:

- our family.
- our church background.
- our denomination.
- trusted teachers.
- our culture.
- our own experiences.

Many of those influences are good and have helped us grow. But every follower of Christ should continually bring even deeply held beliefs before the Lord with humility, asking whether they truly align with His Word.

Questions to Consider Before Sunday

As you prepare for Sunday's study of the Damascus Road, spend some time reflecting on these questions.

1. **What is more important: the sincerity of my beliefs, or that what I believe is actually true?**
2. **When was the last time you honestly examined one of your own long-held beliefs in the light of God's Word?**
3. **As you read Acts 9:1-22, pay close attention to the story itself. Who takes the initiative in Saul's salvation? Who is pursuing whom? Who is acting? Who is responding?**

Closing Thought

As remarkable as Saul's story is, **Acts 9 is not ultimately about Saul.**

It is about **Jesus Christ.**

- Only the risen Lord has the authority to stop a man like Saul in his tracks.
- Only Jesus can take His greatest earthly enemy and make him His chosen servant.
- Only Christ has the power to open blind eyes, soften a hardened heart, forgive the guilty, and transform a persecutor into a preacher.

On Sunday we will stand with Saul on the Damascus Road and witness one of the clearest demonstrations in all of Scripture that **Jesus Christ is Lord.** The One whom Saul believed he was opposing was, in reality, the sovereign King who had already laid claim to his life.

What no human argument could accomplish, the risen Christ accomplished in a single moment by His sovereign grace.