

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 1: Saul the Persecutor: Zeal Without Knowledge -- Acts 8:1–3; Philippians 3:4–6

There is a young man standing just outside the city wall of Jerusalem, and the cloaks of an angry mob are piling up at his feet. He is holding the coats so that the others can throw their stones more freely. In front of him a man named Stephen is being battered to death, and even as the stones fall, Stephen is praying for the very people killing him. The young man watches the whole thing. He does not flinch. Luke tells us his name almost in a whisper, the way you might first mention a character who will matter more than anyone yet realizes: “and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

That young man approved of the killing, and he was only getting started. “There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem,” Luke writes, “and they were all scattered.” And Saul was the storm at the center of it. “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” The word translated “ravaging” was used for a wild animal tearing a body apart. He went door to door. He pulled mothers from their children and husbands from their homes. He was a one-man wrecking crew aimed straight at the people of God.

And here is the unsettling part. Saul was not a thug or a criminal. He was a model believer of his day. Years later he would lay out his credentials like a man emptying his pockets: “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.” He had the right birth, the right tribe, the right training, the right rule-keeping. By every external measure, he was a deeply religious, deeply sincere, deeply moral man. And he was dead wrong about the most important thing in the universe.

That is where the story of Paul begins, and it is a sobering place to start. Before there was Paul the missionary, Paul the writer of letters, Paul the man who could say “to live is Christ,” there was Saul the persecutor, certain he was serving God while he was fighting against Him. His zeal was real. His sincerity was real. His religious resume was real. None of it could save him, and worse, it was carrying him in exactly the wrong direction. Before we meet the grace that stopped him, we need to feel the danger of where he stood, because his danger is closer to our own than we might like to admit.

Group Discussion: Saul was as sincere and zealous as a religious person could be, and he was completely wrong, even fighting against God while believing he served Him. Why is sincerity, by itself, not a safe place to stand? Can a person be passionately, devoutly religious and still be lost? What does this say about how we decide what is true?

Personal Reflection: Saul trusted in his pedigree, his performance, and his zeal. If you are honest, what do you tend to lean on for the quiet confidence that you are right with God: your church attendance, your moral record, your family heritage, your knowledge of the Bible? Where might your own confidence be resting on something other than Christ Himself?

Read Acts 8:1–3; Philippians 3:4–6

Study Questions

1. Luke records that “Saul approved of his execution” (Acts 8:1), and then that “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). What does this opening portrait reveal about the seriousness and intensity of Saul’s opposition to Christ and His church, and why does it matter that the man God would later use began here?
2. It is sobering that religious zeal drove Saul to harm the very people of God. Where might zeal in your own life be aimed at the wrong target, defending your opinions, winning arguments, or controlling outcomes, rather than serving Christ and loving people? Name one place where your passion needs to be re-aimed.
3. In Philippians 3:4–6 Paul lists the things he once counted as gain: “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.” Why did Paul once put confidence in these credentials, and what do they tell us about the kind of righteousness that cannot make a person right with God?
4. Make your own honest list. What would go on your “confidence in the flesh” resume, the things you are quietly tempted to trust in, such as your background, your reputation, your good deeds, or your record of service? What would it cost you to count those things as loss compared to knowing Christ?
5. Paul later wrote of his own people, “they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2). How does Saul’s life show that zeal and sincerity, however intense, are not enough when they are not grounded in the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ?
6. Most of us assume that meaning well is enough, that God surely accepts a sincere heart. Where have you leaned on your good intentions as if they settled the matter? In what area do you most need to test your zeal against the actual teaching of Scripture rather than your own feelings?
7. Paul says that “as to righteousness under the law” he was “blameless” (Philippians 3:6), and yet at that very time he was lost and fighting God. What does this teach us about the limits of law-keeping, moral performance, and outward religion for putting us right with God?
8. Saul measured himself against the law and came out looking blameless, which fed his pride. Where do you tend to measure yourself against other people or against your own standards in a way that leaves you feeling secure and superior? How does Saul’s example expose the danger in that habit?

9. Saul was as religious, as moral, and as sincere as a human being could be, and still he was without Christ and needed to be saved. What does this say to the common belief that a sincere, good, religious person must surely be accepted by God? According to the gospel, what does a person actually need in order to be made right with God, and why can no resume of our own ever substitute for it?
10. Look back across this portrait of Saul, the approving witness at Stephen's death, the man ravaging the church, the flawless Pharisee confident in his record. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this picture to form you, whether to soften pride, to re-aim misguided zeal, or to move your trust off your own record and onto Him. What is the one truth from Saul's story you most need to carry into this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 10:1–3, a zeal for God that is not according to knowledge; 1 Timothy 1:12–16, Paul the foremost of sinners shown mercy as an example; Acts 7:54–60, the stoning of Stephen that Saul witnessed and approved; Galatians 1:13–14, Paul's former life and his advance in Judaism beyond his peers; Proverbs 14:12, a way that seems right to a man but ends in death