

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

Acts 9:1-19 (ESV)

For the past two episodes we've been celebrating all that God accomplished through Philip in bringing the Gospel to Samaria and leading the Ethiopian official to faith in Christ. It is exciting to see the ways the Kingdom of God grew and expanded to Samaria and Africa.

But persecution continued to rage against Jewish believers led by an extremist Jewish rabbi named Saul.

Acts 9:1-19 Saul Confronted by Jesus

We have the unique opportunity to read Saul/Paul's recollection of that experience. Acts 22 records Paul's speech given to fellow Jews in the Temple compound.

Acts 22:1–16 Paul's Testimony Before Temple Mob

As a result of being born and raised in Tarsus in Cilicia, Paul was a Roman citizen, likely fluent in Cilician, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. Gamaliel, Paul's mentor, was one of the most respected Rabbis in all Judaism. As he will make known in his testimony to King Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul was a Pharisee and radically committed to the Mosaic Law and Mishna. Paul was brilliant, energetic and motivated. Paul was a force to be reckoned with.

Sometime later, Paul was incarcerated in Caesarea waiting to be transported to Rome to argue his case before Caesar. He was given an opportunity to tell his story to King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice. Agrippa was a Herod (in the line of King Herod) and was the last of the Herod's assigned by the Romans to rule Israel. We pick up the story in Acts 26:1-18.

Acts 26:1–18 Paul's Testimony Before King Agrippa

"...in raging fury". Paul hated Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus' followers to the point of hunting them down even outside the borders of Israel. Why? As he stated in his Jerusalem testimony, Paul was *zealous for God*, that is, he was radically committed to serving God and protecting Judaism. We speculate that Paul saw "the Way", which was rapidly growing and spreading, as an existential threat to Judaism. We cannot emphasize enough how deeply and violently Paul hated Jesus and Jesus' followers.

In all three accounts Paul's persecution of Jesus' followers is described by Jesus as persecuting *Him*. This speaks to our intimate identity with Christ and He with us. To hurt one of His followers is to hurt Him.

After his confrontation with Jesus, Saul was plunged into indescribable turmoil as indicated by his three days hard fast (9:9). He thought he was serving God and protecting Judaism by hunting down Jesus' followers when, in fact, as Stephen had argued, Saul was actually resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting the One God had sent to carry forward His program (7:51-55). He was completely on the wrong side of God. Further, he had to admit his interpretation of Scripture was wrong. His dedication to the Mishna, the Oral Law, was wrong. Though saturated with the Hebrew Scriptures, he missed the Messiah! Things were horribly wrong in Pharisaic Judaism. He was a murderer. He supported Stephen's murder, but now he realized Stephen spoke the truth. How many innocent lives had he destroyed in the name of God?

This was an agonizing paradigm shift for Saul.

Praise God Saul responded in faith.

Acts 9:17-20 From Persecutor to Preacher

By the mercy and power of Jesus, the Persecutor became the Preacher.

In this episode we see God's power to save and transform the hardest of hearts. Perhaps you have Sauls in your life whom you can't imagine coming to faith in Jesus. If God can save Saul of Tarsus, He can save your Saul. Don't give up. Keep praying.

In this episode we see the value of personal testimony. At least twice, Paul shared his testimony to defend himself but also to tell the story of Jesus. Here at Grace, we believe it is valuable for each of us to be able to share our testimony of faith in Jesus. We use the occasions of membership and baptism as opportunities to prepare and share our testimonies. It will be our joy to hear two testimonies this morning.

In this episode as well as previous, we see the early Church's commitment to water baptism. In the early Church, baptism immediately followed faith. Unfortunately, in our evangelical tradition, a long gap usually occurs between initial faith and water baptism. This gap may have developed out of concern that water baptism not be construed as a work necessary for salvation.

I don't see us reverting to the practice of the early Church, but we do value water baptism and practice it in obedience to Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20).

This morning it is our joy to witness the water baptism of Laureli Griffin and Mackenzie Nolan.

Voice of the Martyrs Needs for August:

Nerf Balls / Dental Floss / Gauze for Bandaging