



13 | ACTS 8:1-4

INTRODUCING SAUL OF TARSUS

Don't give up on anyone. God loves to save the most unlikely people.

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Call to Worship

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. ² I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High. —Psalm 9:1-2

Songs

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Introduction

We continue our series in the book of Acts called “Life on Life Discipleship.” Our title this morning is: “Introducing Saul of Tarsus”.

God has an amazing way of choosing his servants. We find in this chapter a zealous Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, one of the most prominent members of the Sanhedrin, violently persecuting the church of Jesus Christ. In Acts 9, this same persecutor is converted on the Damascus Road and is turned apostle. He becomes one of the great giants of the faith to this very day. Isn't God good? Could you have imagined that he would have chosen you? God is so gracious! He doesn't choose many wise, and if he does, he has to humble them to the dust, which he does with Saul of Tarsus (*cf* 1 Cor 1:26-31).

The stoning of Stephen was the signal for a campaign of persecution against the church in Jerusalem, in which somehow the apostles seem to have enjoyed immunity for the most part. The public respected pious men who were devoted to the Temple services, and they evidently distinguished them from people like Stephen who denounced the Temple. Reading between the lines, we may infer that the Hellenists (to whom Stephen belonged) were the main targets of attack. In the accounts of the dispersal of believers from Jerusalem it is only Hellenists who are mentioned (Philip in verse 5 and others unnamed in Acts 11:19).¹

At the very center of the persecution in Jerusalem, is this key figure, Saul of Tarsus. Who is the greatest baseball player that ever lived? Who is the best running back in the NFL? People argue the answers to such questions endlessly. We are always arguing about who is the best. The answer is clear, however, when we ask the identity of the greatest theologian who has ever lived—the Apostle Paul. He was also the greatest missionary and evangelist and pastor. What God wrought in and through the life of that man whom He gifted so graciously, and who performed so valiantly and gallantly on behalf of the gospel, staggers the imagination.² Much of the rest of Acts is about Saul of Tarsus, who we know by his Greek name, Paul. Before he was an apostle, he was the rising star of Israel, a rabbi who was trained under Gamaliel. His zeal was misguided. He believed it was God's will to eradicate Christianity from the earth. So he planned and approved of the execution of Stephen.

I want us to consider the key thought for these verses, and it is this: Whatever difficult circumstances you are in, embrace them as your mission field, and lift up the name of Jesus! You may find yourself with some horrible illness, and you are seeing a lot of doctors and nurses. I dare say that your service to them in preaching Christ to them is far greater than their earthly service to you in healing your body. Wherever you are. Whatever you are doing, remember your mission: lift up the name of Jesus. The goal cannot be to change your circumstances. The goal is that every person on earth will be touched by Jesus through you and all God's people.

Key thought: Don't give up on anyone. God loves to save the most unlikely people.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Acts: Bible Study Commentary* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2017), Ac 8:1b-8.

² R. C. Sproul, *Acts, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 137.

1. PAUL THE PERSECUTOR (8:1A)

Acts 8:1a | And Saul approved of his execution.

Saul looked with approval on the murder of Stephen. He did not see it as murder. Religion blinded his eyes. “I obtained mercy,” he wrote in later years, “because I did it ignorantly,” (1 Tim 1:13). Saul was too refined to stand there throwing stones, but not too refined to hold the coats of those who did.³

These verses serve as a transition from one major section of Acts to another as the story of Stephen ends, launching the spread of the gospel according to Jesus’ plan in 1:8. They also further introduce Saul, who will become the main character for much of the rest of Acts.

SAUL’S RAGE

Saul goes from looking after coats at Stephen’s murder to “ravaging the church,” forcing his way into Christian homes and taking people off to prison (8:3; *cf* 9:13). In our day we would say he was “radicalized”: he hated the followers of Jesus and wanted to see the movement wiped out. As an apostle, Paul himself never forgot his past, mentioning it in his speeches in Acts and in his letters (22:4–5; 26:10; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:13). It is important not to conceive of Paul as faithful according to the old covenant. Before his conversion, Paul was *not a faithful Jew*. One cannot be faithful while rejecting the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Yet he sincerely thought he was faithful.

However, Paul does highlight the unexpected nature of God’s way of carrying out his plan for the world. From choosing an idol worshiper (Abraham) in Ur for the fulfillment of his ultimate promises and an Egyptian-educated man in Pharaoh’s court to save Israel from slavery (Moses), to raising up a boy who kills a giant with a slingshot and becomes king (David)—not to mention coming as a carpenter from Nazareth who tells people the greatest thing they can become is a servant and who dies, cursed, on a cross—no one but God would write this script.⁴ So, let me introduce to you the most unlikely of converts, Saul of Tarsus.

SAUL’S HISTORY

Born the same year as Jesus. Paul was born, according to tradition, in the same year that Jesus was born.

Born of the tribe of Benjamin. He was born of the Tribe of Benjamin in Asia Minor, in the city of Tarsus. He describes himself as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (*cf* 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5) and the “son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6).

His Hebrew and Greek names. In Jewish circles he was known by his name’s sake, the most famous Benjaminite of Israel: King Saul, so he was called Saul among his family and Jewish friends. Roman citizenship meant that the apostle also had a full Latin name: Paulus (meaning “small” or “humble” in Latin, which is the name he used in Gentile circles.⁵

A Roman citizen. His father was a Roman citizen, and it seems he must have been a well-respected merchant, as Tarsus is a merchant city on a major trade route. The fact that Saul’s

³ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 8:1a.

⁴ James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John—Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 406.

⁵ John Pollock. *The Apostle: The Life of Paul* (John Pollock Series) (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 17.

father was a Roman citizen meant Saul was born a free man, and he inherited that citizenship from his father.

His languages. Though Paul from infancy could speak **Greek**, the common language of the Roman Empire, he of course spoke **Aramaic** at home, read the **Hebrew** Scriptures, and would have had a working knowledge of **Latin**. The school attached to the Tarsus synagogue taught nothing but the Hebrew text of the sacred Law. Each boy repeated its phrases in chorus after the hazzan, or synagogue keeper, until vowels, accent, and rhythm were precisely correct. Paul learned to write the Hebrew characters accurately on papyrus, thus gradually forming his own rolls of the Scriptures.⁶

His city: Tarsus, a famous trade city. It's helpful that Saul is from the trade city of Tarsus. Tarsus was at the extreme southeastern tip of Asia Minor, close to Antioch, just a little bit north of Jerusalem. Tarsus was on the trade routes, where all merchandise moved from Europe and Asia south through the Middle East, down into Africa, and back. In antiquity Tarsus was one of the wealthiest cities of that region. Paul would have had such a great exposure to the Gentile world that would later melt his heart with compassion, where he could say:

God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. —1 Timothy 2:4

Tarsus University. Saul was further exposed to the highest level of education in the city where he lived. *Tarsus University* was the largest university in the world at that time, bigger than the universities in Athens and Alexandria.⁷ Tarsus was a cosmopolitan city, a city in which merchants, scholars, intellectuals, and travelers from all over the world mingled.⁸

Taught by Rabbi Gamaliel. At the age of thirteen, because of the prowess and brilliance that he had already displayed, he would have been sent away from Tarsus to Jerusalem to go to a kind of seminary, as it were, to study under the tutorship of the leading theologian in the world of that time, Gamaliel. (We were introduced to Gamaliel in Acts 5; cf 22:3). Saul studied under Gamaliel for seven years and received the equivalent of **two PhDs in theology**. It has been said that by the age of twenty-one Saul of Tarsus was the most educated Jew in Palestine. He had mastered the Old Testament and all the rabbinic interpretations of it, and his star had risen in meteoric fashion.⁹ **He may have later possibly for a time studied at the University of Tarsus as well.** Between the cosmopolitan education that he received in Tarsus and the elite religious education he received “at the feet of Gamaliel,” Saul of Tarsus was a brilliant mind and a religious renaissance man, if you will. Listen to his testimony:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem], 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. —Acts 22:3

A tentmaker. The young Saul grew up in that environment. Initially he followed a commonplace tradition of the time, which was learning a trade through apprenticeship. One

⁶ Pollock. *The Apostle*, 18.

⁷ Howard Clark Kee & Franklin W. Young. *Understanding The New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1958), 208.

⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 138.

⁹ Sproul, *ibid*.

of the most lucrative trades in that day and region was **tentmaking**. As a young lad, Saul would have learned the trade of making tents, which served him well throughout his life.

A member of the Sanhedrin. By the age of 30, Saul of Tarsus was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish senate based on the seventy elders who aided Moses (Num 11:16-17). There were seventy members plus the high priest.

Possible marriage. Paul may have at one time been married. As a member of the Sanhedrin and a prominent rabbi and Pharisee, marriage was strongly encouraged. It would have been unheard of to be an unmarried rabbi. It seems, looking at the wording of 1 Corinthians 7, that Paul was most likely a widower. It seems he was likely married for a short time but sometime before his conversion, he became a widower. Sometime after his conversion he was given the gift of celibacy (“a genuine gift of freedom from sexual need”).¹⁰ Paul desires for everyone with this gift to use it as he has for the sake of the kingdom.

Directed Stephen’s execution. As a revered rabbi, Paul would have been well known in and around the academic circles of Jerusalem by the time of the stoning of Stephen, where we find him present, directing the people who are executing the church’s first martyr.

Acts 7:58 | They cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Stephen’s execution is the first thing for which Paul is known in biblical history. The Bible does not tell us why the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of Saul, but it is not hard to guess. Not only was his scholarship known to everyone in the crowd, but his profound hostility to Christianity was also well known. No one present would have doubted that Saul, at very least, would acquiesce to the act.¹¹ Two verses later Luke tells us:

Acts 8:1a | And Saul approved of his execution.

What does that tell us? It tells us that our God is a merciful God.

GOD’S MERCY

God is not like us. He sees all of us. He knows our sins. We may try to weigh the character of certain people. But God chooses the most unworthy people. None of us would have chosen Saul of Tarsus to be the premier apostle. And that’s where God differs from us. He is infinitely more merciful than any one of us. Paul would later testify to this infinite mercy he received from God.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. —1 Timothy 1:15-17

All of Saul’s brilliance was being used against the church, specifically Stephen. This zealous Pharisee Saul was there approving of Stephen’s execution. But God is able to radically

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 288.

¹¹ Sproul, 139.

transform the heart. And he's about to do that for Saul, but not before he continues his rampage against the church.

2. THE PERSECUTION (8:1B-3)

Acts 8:1b-3 | ...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. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

THE NATURE OF THE PERSECUTION

Acts 8:1b | ...And there arose on that day a great persecution...

It was a fierce persecution. It was a great, or fierce persecution laser focused against followers of Jesus Christ. Saul's zeal for the Law was displayed most vividly in his persecution of the church (Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:6). He really thought that persecuting the believers was one way of serving God, so he did it with a clear conscience (2 Tim 1:3). He obeyed the light that he had and, when God gave him more light, he obeyed that and became a Christian!

THE NEARNESS OF THE PERSECUTION

Acts 8:1c | ... a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The persecution was in Jerusalem where most of the believers were. It was near. They had to leave their homes. They were scattered, running for their lives. **There are different words for “scattered” in Greek.** One means dispersed so that the item is gone from that point on, like scattering a person's ashes on the ocean's waves. That is not the word used here in verses 1 and 4. The word used here means scattered in order to be planted. When God scatters his people, it brings great hardship, but he does it for a purpose. Difficulty and trials all fit into God's perfect kingdom plan for his people. We may feel scattered, but God is planting his people to bring the lost to Christ. Is that true of you? Wherever you find yourself—whether scattered by work or family or education or some other means—have you considered yourself planted in that place? Have you put down roots and born fruit for Jesus Christ? That is what these early Christians did.¹²

Acts 8:1d | ... all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. It seems that the Hellenized believers were scattered, but the Hebrew believers were left alone. That the Jerusalem church continued to exist is clear from Acts 9:26; 11:2, 22; 15:4; and 21:17. What it does mean is that the church

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 133.

was broken up, and many of its members forced to flee.¹³ From this time onward the Jerusalem church appears to have consisted almost entirely of “Hebrews.”¹⁴ It was only natural that the Hellenists of which Stephen was likely one would bear the brunt of the persecution. The apostles saw it as their duty to remain and not abandon their posts as shepherds and protectors of those who remained in Jerusalem.¹⁵

The persecution was so near, and the church was broken in pieces, but remember that Christ’s church cannot be ultimately broken. He scatters us to plant us. We must always remember the words of our Lord:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. —*Matthew 16:18*

THE NOISE OF THE PERSECUTION

Acts 8:2 | Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

The devout men here, may not even be referring to believers, but people from Stephen’s synagogue. So, proper funeral honors are given Stephen. It’s interesting that according to the oral law, the Mishnah, you were not allowed to mourn a person who was executed (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6.6). Here we see the love of believers as well as perhaps the honor from devout men who may not have known the Lord.¹⁶ They protested the death of Stephen. This was not right! Saul didn’t care. He thought he was doing a service for God. Jesus said this would happen.

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. —*John 16:2*

THE NETWORK OF THE PERSECUTION

Saul thought he was serving God. He knew how to exterminate the Christians. He was very connected. He went everywhere driving out the Christians. He was ruthless and showed no mercy. He would later say that “as to zeal,” he was “a persecutor of the church” (Phil 3:6). We see this recorded in Acts 8:3.

Acts 8:3 | But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

In what ways did Saul persecute the church? He “was ravaging the church,” and the verb here describes a wild animal mangling its prey. The expression is used of the ravages of a wild boar. He had his hit list. He entered every house where a believer lived. There was hardly a home where his cruelty was not felt. The prisons overflowed.¹⁷ The stoning of Stephen, which Saul approved, shows the lengths to which he would go to achieve his purpose. He persecuted Christians, both men and women, “unto the death.” Paul testifies:

¹³ MacArthur. *Acts*, 230–231.

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 174

¹⁵ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 218.

¹⁶ Chalmer Ernest Faw, *Acts*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 102.

¹⁷ John Phillips. *Acts*, Ac 8:3.

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women. —Acts 22:4

He not only chased them down in houses, but he went to their places of worship, in the synagogues.

In one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. —Acts 22:19

He had the believers imprisoned and beaten. Paul testified to King Agrippa.

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. —Acts 26:9–11

If they renounced their faith in Jesus Christ (“compelling them to blaspheme”—Acts 26:11), they were set free; if they did not recant, they could be killed.¹⁸

After Stephen’s death, the Jewish authorities, with Paul as their chief agent, embarked on systematic persecution of Jesus’ followers.¹⁹

The persecution was such that it was both civil and religious. Church and state in Israel were united. We saw this in the death of Christ. Jewish and Roman authorities put him to death. Saul made sure he used all his authority to “ravage” the people of God.

It’s interesting that Saul would drag Christians away and commit them to prison. Remember the same fate would befall Saul, later in life, as an apostle, Paul would write several of the New Testament letters from prison.

THE NORMALCY OF PERSECUTION

Every Christian who lives godly is going to suffer persecution.

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. —2 Timothy 3:12

The interesting thing in Acts is that it is clear that when one of God’s recruits goes down, God raises another up. And here we find that Stephen’s replacement is Saul of Tarsus. Saul has a similar upbringing as Stephen, but he’s even more brilliant. He will suffer so much more than what he inflicted on the church. Remember the words that the Lord gave to Ananias.

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” —Acts 9:15-16

¹⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 434.

¹⁹ Pollock. *The Apostle*, 28.

3. GOD'S PLAN (8:4)

A PLAN FOR THE WORLD

Acts 8:4 | Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

God loves the world and wants to see people everywhere saved. And you are part of that. If you don't obey the great commission and go, God will scatter his church so that we do bring the Gospel to every nation and every people group.

Sometimes God brings us what we might see as bad or difficult circumstances. It looks like a wall or a pit to us. But whenever we think there is a wall in front of us, God makes a door. God always turns our stumbling blocks into stepping-stones.

We must come to the realization as God's dearly loved children, that changing our circumstances can sometimes be a way of fighting against God. **God has you right where he wants you to complete his perfect plan.** God wants us to bring the riches of Christ to the whole world. That plan is spoken of in many places, for instance in Ephesians.

To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God. —*Ephesians 3:8-9*

Jesus made this plan clear in Acts 1.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. —*Acts 1:8*

Go! Jesus says. But sometimes we get distracted. We don't want to go. We like our comfort zone. Jesus will make sure we go. Whether it be through normal circumstance or through devastating circumstances, Jesus will put us where we need to be to lift up his name and bring people into his kingdom.

A PLAN FOR THE WORD

Acts 8:4 | Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Wherever these dear disciples went, they preached the word. They didn't hold on too tightly to earthly things. They refused to get distracted. They preached Jesus to everyone they saw.

You can see God's plan to display the glory of Jesus. God puts us in places that we never could have imagined being. Some of you would never choose Chicagoland to live, but God has placed you here.

God wants the word of God to seep out of you. Are you in the word "day and night" (Psa 1:1) loving the God of the word as you meditate on the word of God? Are you meeting with God and his Spirit in his word? Are you saturated in the word? When you get poked or discouraged or find yourself in a trial, are you going to the word? Are you around people who love the word?

Are you preaching the word with humility and brokenness wherever you are? Are you lifting up the name of Jesus in your home? If you are married, are you lifting up the name of Jesus to your spouse? If you have children, are you displaying the glory of Jesus to your kids?

Are you ready to preach Christ and give an answer for the hope that is in you in your workplace? Are you praying right now for those in your life who are lost? Name them in your mind right now. Pray for them right now.

Are you willing to be scattered? Are you willing to go if God calls you? We are called to the ends of the earth! Some of you would much rather be somewhere other than Chicago. Perhaps God has scattered you here. Maybe I should be asking, are you willing to stay in this rebellious city of Chicago? Are you willing to stay and preach and lift up the name of Jesus?

Conclusion

As you consider the persecution that came through Saul of Tarsus, remember, he becomes the Apostle Paul. Are there people in your life, and you just cannot imagine them as believers? I pray this study is helping you to put away the idea that anyone is beyond saving. God can bring the hardest sinner or the most self-righteous Pharisee to himself. Just look at your own conversion if you doubt! God is able to save to the uttermost. Amen and amen!