Introducing Saul of Tarsus

Ben: Last week Rod mentioned that we would have a guest speaker this morning to lead us through Acts 9. This morning I need you to use your imagination. Imagine with me that we were able to reach back into the first century and bring Saul of Tarsus himself to share his testimony with us today.

We also know him as the Apostle Paul, and we know his story from here in Acts 9, his testimony in Acts 22, Acts 26, Galatians 1, and 1 Corinthians 15. You have probably heard about him in Scripture, today, imagine with me that we get to hear from Saul himself.

So, without further ado, it is my privilege to introduce to you a man who has been called one of the most successful missionaries in the history of the church. He’s here today to share with us his testimony of how the Holy Spirit worked in his life, and how he was transformed by meeting Jesus Christ. Ladies and gentlemen, Saul of Tarsus.

Saul:

Thank you. Thank you. Your reception is very gracious but remember, I too am only a man, human like you.

I was pleased when Ben asked me to come and share my story with the Saints of Agape Christian Church. What a great name. I’ve heard so much about how you love like Jesus loves and how you faithfully preach and teach His Word.

I also like the way you dress in your century. These garments are much more comfortable than what I’m use to, and you have so much variety. I could get used to this.

This morning I will be speaking in my first language, Hebrew, however the Holy Spirit will assure that you understand me in your language. Some expressions may be awkward when translated but I think you’ll understand in your language.

I certainly didn’t think that I would be telling people that the carpenter from Nazareth is the Christ. My name is Saul. In Greek they call me Paulus. I am a Jew. A real Jew, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I was born of the tribe of Benjamin but unlike many of my brothers, I haven’t given in to the Greek culture that has swept our land.

I was born in a Greek speaking city, Tarsus, so I know the Greek language, but primarily I speak a derivative of Hebrew called Aramaic. I worshipped in an Aramaic speaking synagogue.

I am a Roman citizen. My father had been granted citizenship by Rome for service to the Empire.

That saved my life one time when the authorities in Jerusalem ordered me scourged which, by the way is a murderous punishment. I cried out “*Civis Romanus sum*”, “*A citizen of Roman I am*.”

Julian law provided that a Roman citizen could not be punished in such a way without a fair trial. When I produced my diptych, a folded leather tablet containing what you call a birth certificate, proving I was a Roman, they all got pretty nervous.

We were a wealthy family and so we were the social elite. We enjoyed privileges most people couldn’t afford. For most of my growing up years I lived in Jerusalem where I was educated in the school of Gamaliel. He was the leading Rabbi and Pharisee. Everybody wanted to study under him. He was so passionate about the law.

Following my mentor I too became a Pharisee. I was an outstanding student, far ahead of my contemporaries. Actually I was the guy everybody hated because I got “A’s” in every class.  My intellectual integrity could not be challenged, and no one tried.

Our sect started in about 160 before Christ was born. The Sadducees and Essenes were teaching heresy so we separated from them within the Jewish religion. Some people called us Hasidim, or godly people. We were very strict about Sabbath Law and food restrictions. We tithed scrupulously. We wouldn’t even eat a meal if the food was purchased before the tithe was paid.

Some people say the name Pharisee comes from a word that meant “Persianizer” because we shared some characteristics of the Zoroastrian religion of Persia. But we were true Jews.

We were strict Law-abiding Hebrews, committed to restoring our nation to the Law and tradition.

Some would say, “*The new has come, the old must go*.” We said, “*The old must stay and the new must go*.”

When the followers of the Nazarene started telling people that this Jesus was the Messiah and that He rose from the dead it made my blood boil. You can’t kill the Messiah but we killed Jesus.

And since Jesus was killed by crucifixion, how could He be the Messiah? That would be scandalous. It was a contradiction in terms. The Law says, “*a hanged man is cursed by God*”. (I learned later that Deuteronomy 21:23 is about the offense that led a man being hanged.)

I could not allow this blasphemy to continue unchallenged. I rose up against this political anarchy. The members of the Sanhedrin laid hands on me appointing me to lead the effort to rid Jerusalem of Jesus followers.

I was fanatical. I was blind with rage. Everything else in life I put aside to find and punish anyone who dared speak of Jesus as the Messiah. I managed to arrest and have killed a lot of these heretics. I searched them out and tried to force them to renounce their faith. I tried so hard to get them to turn against Jesus. My anger turned to raging fury and became uncontrollable.

But they wouldn’t turn. They held to their teaching as if they knew that Jesus was alive. No amount of torture, no threat of death could change their minds. Some even seemed to rejoice in suffering. They said they were doing it for Him.

I was right there when that blasphemer Stephen killed. I encouraged the mob to stone him. I even held their garments so they were unencumbered as they hurled rocks and stones at him. You should have seen it. It was brutal.

I’ve never spoken of this before, but I’ll never forget the look in Stephen’s eyes that day. He looked toward heaven then straight at me and prayed, *Lord, do not hold this sin against them*. Something changed in me that day.

I had already been experiencing a sense of conflict. My mentor Gamaliel, whom I loved had been somewhat conciliatory to the followers of Jesus. When some of their leaders were on trial before the Sanhedrin, most of the Elders wanted to have them executed, but Gamaliel said we should let them go.

He said, *If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God*.

I was still intent on destroying these people and their blasphemous teaching about Jesus being the Messiah. When my persecution forced them to scatter throughout the region, not content with driving them out of Jerusalem I applied the “right of extradition”.

142 years before the whole Jesus thing a Roman Ambassador delivered this message to Ptolemy 8th of Egypt: “*If any pestilent men have fled to you from Judea, hand them over to the High Priest, that he may punish them according to the Law*.” Caesar reaffirmed that provision of law 95 years later.

I got permission from the High Priest to pursue Jesus followers in Damascus. Under Roman occupation the High Priest was the Head of the Jewish State so he had the authority to deputize me. He gave me letters to present to the synagogues there that I might arrest any followers of The Way.

It was a six day journey to Damascus from Jerusalem. Those were troubling nights for me. I didn’t talk to my companions about this, but at night I kept thinking about how the people refused to deny Jesus, accepting torture and death even with joy. They were undaunted. How could belief in a dead man produce such loyalty?

*About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Sir?” I asked. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,” He replied.* *“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”*

He said, *It is hard for you to kick against the goads*. I wasn’t immediately sure what He meant. Then I remembered that goads, or κεντρα are prickly tools that a farmer would use to train a young ox. If it tried to kick its way out of the yoke the goad would prick his legs and he’d quickly learn not to kick.

I was kicking against the promptings of the Holy Spirit that were invading my mind. I tried to dismiss my misgivings. I was intent on destroying the Jesus followers.

My friends who were with me heard the sound but didn’t see anyone so they were confused. I saw Jesus, the one whom we had killed and who His followers say came back to life.

When I got up from the ground I couldn’t see. Maybe the flash temporarily blinded me, I don’t know, but my friends had to lead me the rest of the way to Damascus, to the place I had arranged for us to stay.

For three days I was blind. I didn’t eat or drink anything. I was too scared and confused. I’m not easily intimidated but I can tell you, I was trembling. I know now that what I saw was a heavenly vision, but at the time I thought I was about to get my “come-uppins” for all the people I had killed. I went to Damascus to arrest Jesus followers. Instead Jesus arrested me.

In Damascus was living a man, a follower of Jesus named Ananias. God appeared to him in a vision also. *Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”*

This man was afraid. He thought that it might be a trick*. Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”*  I can’t blame him. I had quite the reputation.

*But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*

As scared as he was, he obeyed God and came to find me. I can hardly believe it but he called me brother. Imagine that. He called me brother! He said to me,

*The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.* Immediately something like fish scales fell from my eyes and I could see. I got up and was baptized, then I ate and drank to regain my strength.

I couldn’t keep my experience to myself. I knew I had come face to face with God. I had seen the risen Jesus. Immediately I started telling people in the synagogues. I guess they called it preaching.

Everyone was amazed because they knew how I had destroyed Christians in Jerusalem. They were aware that I had travelled with a commission from the High Priest, but they didn’t know I arrived with a commission from a much higher authority.

Nothing could deter me. I told about what I experienced and I preached the Scriptures I know so well. I got into debates about the identity of Jesus but I guess I was the right man for the job. I could hold my own in an argument with any scholar. I confused my opponents. I was able to bring prophecy and history together to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. Many believed because of my testimony and preaching.

Before long my own people, the Jews I used to worship with and for whom I worked to rid the earth of this scandal, they turned against me. They used to adore me because I had it all together. Now they hated me. They conspired to kill me. The Christians helped me slip out of Damascus and I was able to get to Jerusalem.

My arrival there was not a comfortable time for the people or for me. My former colleagues hated me. They said I was a traitor. I reached out to the disciples in Jerusalem but they were afraid of me.

I can’t really blame them either. They knew all too well of my lethal activities prior. Many of them saw me haul their loved ones away to be tortured and killed. Fathers and mothers; brothers and sisters, children.

I probably never would have been accepted by the church if not for a man named Barnabas. I don’t know how he knew my story but he did. He took me to the Apostles and told them of my experience meeting Jesus and how afterward I boldly preached in the name of Jesus. He stood by my side and encouraged me.

This was the start of my long ministry of preaching Jesus to Gentiles as well as to Jews, first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea. I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Nobody picked up my former mantle of hatred so the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. All the church was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

Ben:

Thank you, Saul, for your testimony and for your faithful ministry. You have contributed so much to the cause of Christ. Your preaching, teaching, and letters to the churches even today help us to know the full Gospel of Jesus and how we can be saved by his grace alone. Thank you so much for sharing your testimony with us today.

Before you go, there are some thoughts that I’d like you to comment on

Ben:

The change that you went through was far greater than most people will ever experience. What would cause a person to change so dramatically?

Saul:

Well Ben, when you really meet Jesus, you can’t not change. I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about a living personal God. I think people tend to keep Him at arm’s length. He’s the focus of their religion but not a personal friend so they don’t think about Him except at church.

Jesus is real. He’s a real person. He’s present with me at all times. I live with that knowledge. What was in my past, I can’t bring into my present. Before it was easy to ignore the idea of God, but not now.

Now I live to serve and please Jesus because He loves me and He will be my judge when my life is over. Nothing compares to the life Jesus promises me. My life on earth prepares me for life in Heaven.

You can tell when a man really knows Jesus because he changes.

Ben:

You share your personal testimony often. Is there a reason for that?

Saul:

Yes there is, Ben. You see, you don’t convince people of the truth of the Gospel just by argument. No matter how solid your facts or how well-spoken your arguments, someone will always counter with intelligent and authoritative responses.

I used to baffle my opponents with my arguments. I was sharp. I could answer every question and prove every point. But they were convinced of their positions.

No one could argue with my experience of how Jesus turned me from persecuting His followers to suffering on His behalf. No one could argue with how I went from hating Christians to serving not just Christians but any man who had a need I could meet. I would have been willing to be condemned myself if only I could save others.

People who receive Christ as Lord and Savior are filled with the Holy Spirit. When that happens it’s crucial for them to tell significant others. Public testimony does something for the one giving the testimony and for those hearing it. There’s nothing like the joy and excitement and the enthusiasm of a new Christian.

It’s hard to argue with a life change like that.

Ben:

It seems that you were the right man for the job. No historian or theologian can argue with the importance or impact of your ministry, and how it helped spread the Christian faith throughout the world.

Saul:

I was the right man at the right time. I had the intelligence, the zeal, the energy, and the skills necessary to lead the church of Christ. God, through His Holy Spirit gives gifts to every believer so that we can all contribute to the body of Christ.

When God needed someone to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, I was the man. I didn’t wait for someone else to do what He called me to do myself.

That’s one of the ways you can recognize someone who truly knows Jesus, he uses his gifts and talents to serve God’s mission. No one has to beg him to serve. He looks for opportunities and when he sees one he acts.

Ben:

When Ananias came to you with a message from God, he didn’t tell you everything God had planned for you, did he?

Saul:

You’re right. He didn’t. That would probably have been too much for me right then. I think the Lord seldom gives His whole plan to us all at once. He has plans, but He’s careful not to overwhelm us.

He gives us enough to help us set long range goals of walking in obedience, but He leads us to more specific situations where He wants us to serve, but He needs to know that we’re willing to serve. When He knows our willingness and desire to serve He tells us more.

You see it with the Elders of your church. God is working right now to prepare some men to one day lead as Elders, but not until they desire to do so does He call them into Eldership.

Even if Ananias had known God’s complete plan for me, I’m thankful He didn’t tell me. If I had known the suffering I would face; the beatings, the hate, the times in jail, I might not have accepted His call.

The same is probably true for all of us. If we know every trouble and persecution we’ll face, we may turn away before we really fall in love with Jesus.

Ben:

One last question: you said that after all of this, the church enjoyed peace, and was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Do you think that’s true for the Church today as well?

Saul:

Well that was an unusual time. I think God blessed the church in a special way then. Peace didn’t last very long. Opposition to the word of Christ was and is intense. Generally speaking, when the church is living for Jesus, serving as He did, calling people to repentance, and encouraging righteousness, there will be opposition.

Let’s never forget that we have an enemy who wishes to destroy everything about Jesus, just like I tried to. But we should never be discouraged. We must stand firm until the end. We must be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.

We know that one day Jesus will return and take us to Heaven. Until then we hold firmly to the Word of God. And we know that no one and no thing can separate us from the love of our Savior.