

Saul the Persecutor

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 September 2024

Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, September 8th. My name is Kent Dixon. Most of you know that. And it's my joy to be the pastor here. So we're continuing in our sermon series, an ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. Over the past several weeks, we've recognized that as the early church grew, persecution towards it also grew and intensified.

And in our sermon on the martyring of Stephen a few weeks ago, we noted that there was a man who was present at this event. It was clear that this man even gave approval for Stephen to be executed.

And that man was Saul. Our focus passage this morning is found in Acts 8, verses 1 to 3. So go ahead and turn in a Bible. You can grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, or if you have one with you, I'll just hold on for a second. And then I will also read it for us so you can listen if you prefer that.

[1 : 08] And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Acts 8, 1 to 3. So our sermon this morning is titled, Saul the Persecutor. So we're going to consider Saul. We're going to consider his background.

And we're also going to consider some of the factors that led to his extremely passionate persecution of the early church. Three verses.

Do you recognize that this morning? Three verses. So this morning we've only heard three verses in this passage. But they really seem to cover an awful lot, don't they?

[2 : 15] There's definitely a passage of time there from when Stephen is martyred until the persecution of the early church escalates again. And there's clearly also must have been a significant amount of activity that happened during the action and events that are conveyed in these three verses.

There's a lot of, well, we've got three verses here, you can gather from what is mentioned in these three verses that lots happened that isn't outlined here.

So not only that, but in the end of Acts 7, we're suddenly introduced to one of the most pivotal characters in all of Scripture. Aside from Jesus, of course, right?

The stage is also set for one of, if not the most dramatic and miraculous conversion stories in human history.

Maybe your own conversion story is dramatic and should be to you. Has been literally life-changing to and for you. You know stories of dramatic conversions of other people in your life.

[3 : 22] Your loved ones or friends or pastors or things like that. You hear these dramatic stories. When Jesus interacts with someone, when God comes down and interacts with someone and changes their life forever.

So as we learned in our last sermon in this series, Stephen's death was a trigger point. It was a tipping point that sparked a further escalation in the persecution of the church.

So we learned from our passage this morning that the disciples were in Jerusalem. They were ultimately scattered out throughout Judea and Samaria. But the apostles, remember the distinction, were all disciples.

The apostles were 12 select by Jesus. So the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, but the disciples were scattered. So we're introduced to the central figure of this latest persecution in our sermon on the martyrdom of Stephen a few weeks ago.

This was a young man named Saul. We also know that the same man later became known as Paul the apostle. I was talking to a good friend of mine last night.

[4 : 31] He said, so what are you preaching on tomorrow? And I said, talking about Saul. And he said, which one? And I said, good point. And I said, interesting too, right? Both that name relates to persecution in two different people in scripture.

Interesting. So here we are with Saul, this young man. So we're going to consider his conversion in more detail later. So I'm purposefully saying, Saul, Saul, Saul, Saul, Saul.

You'll hear it throughout. I'm not going to tease too much about what's to come. You know it well.

And we're going to dig into it because every time I dig into the story of this man and what happened and what God did in his life and what God continues to do through him in the church, it's miraculous.

So to appreciate the significance of his conversion, it's helpful, I believe, to know his background.

Know what the factors were that motivated him in his persecution of the followers of Jesus.

So in the interest of keeping us grounded in who the man was versus who he became, as I've said, we're going to refer to him as Saul. So what was Saul's early life and background like?

[5 : 48] There's some highlights for you and we'll go through them together. So we learn later in Acts that Saul was born in a place called Tarsus of Cilicia. Tarsus was the capital of that region.

You know me. I've got a history background in my education. I'm fascinated by historical things and context and where things came from and where they're going and all those things. So Paul was from Tarsus and it was the capital, as I said, of that region.

So along with Athens and Alexandria, hopefully you've heard those names, it was a center. Tarsus was a center of culture and learning and influence in the ancient world.

This was a place of note. He wasn't born in, say, Coldale, Alberta, no disrespect to my loving wife, but it wasn't some backwater little place, right? Tarsus was a big deal.

So Paul was from a place of note. It was a city that was visited by historical figures throughout time. Julius Caesar went there. Mark Antony and Cleopatra both went there.

[6 : 51] Tarsus was located, as we've touched on, in Cilicia. And Cilicia was a Roman province in the southeast area of Asia Minor.

And to put it in contemporary context, it's an area that we now know as, anyone? Turkey. Exactly. 2 Corinthians 11.22 gives us a lot of information from this man in his own words when he says, Are they Hebrews?

So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Saul, then Paul, speaking of his background, is setting expectations of who he is and all of these things that would give context for what his thinking is, what his upbringing was, what his background was.

He gives more of his background in Romans 11, verse 1, when he says, I ask then, Did God reject his people? By no means.

I am an Israelite myself, he says, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. So there's the context of who this man is and what his upbringing was.

[8 : 09] Then in Philippians 3, verse 5, we learn, Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, he's restating these things, a Hebrew of Hebrews.

Interesting phrasing. What does that mean? Well, some reading I did suggests that that probably means he's saying, I was very Hebrew, implying that both of his parents were of Hebrew lineage.

So he is extra Hebrew coming from both his parents. And then he says, In regard to the law, a Pharisee. So again, being very clear where his flag is planted, right?

So what other information do we have? Well, looking ahead to an interaction Saul, then Paul, had when he was arrested, he declared himself to be a Roman citizen.

He says that, and at the time, the centurions who've come to arrest him go, Uh-oh. So they're thinking, How do we, we didn't know he was a Roman citizen. That's a problem.

[9 : 12] What do we do? We can't arrest him, can we? So that caused concern from the Romans who sought to arrest him, because he said, I am a Roman citizen. One commentator I read suggested that one of Paul's ancestors may have either purchased Roman citizenship at some point, or was rewarded for it through services rendered.

So they did something for the Roman Empire, and were rewarded with citizenship. So now we don't know this for sure, but this makes some sense, because he declared himself to be a Roman citizen. He was a Hebrew, so how did those things happen? Well, there's some thoughts for it. Another interesting thing. So we do not know when Saul was born.

Scripture does not tell us at all. But some place his birth around the same time as the birth of Jesus. So they would have been contemporaries in age, roughly in their, I mean, Jesus was in his mid-30s. Paul was around the same age, maybe a few years older, a few years younger. So what about his training and his education? You know, and as I, I'm going to let you peek behind the curtain of my thinking and sermon prep.

[10:31] So as I sat down to write this, I did it in the context of Acts, right? So it's just a little chunk of Acts, but folks, it was not lost on me that I'm talking about the Apostle Paul.

So, yeah, it was just kind of like, how do I do this justice? Well, we'll do this piece, and then we'll do another piece. And so, but I mean, as you all well know, we could preach for weeks, months, years, talk about Paul's influence, talk about how God used him, how God changed him, his strengths, his challenges, all of the things.

So in our sermon a few weeks ago, hopefully you remember learning about, and we talked about a religious leader named Gamaliel. Do you remember that? I did have one person come to me afterwards and say, is that the same Gamaliel that taught?

And I say, yep, we'll get there. So Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a teacher of the law, scripture tells us. And you may remember that when the religious leaders, when the Sanhedrin were getting very worked up about the apostles, were trying to shut down them talking about Jesus, Gamaliel stepped up and said, whoa, whoa, whoa, do you know the hornet's nest you were about to kick here?

Because best case scenario, leave it alone and it will peter out on its own. Worst case scenario, if God is directing these men to speak as they speak, good luck with that, he basically says.

[12:02] So Gamaliel was wise, he was respected. So how does he fit in here? Well, let's fast forward a little bit. In Acts 22, you don't need to flip there, but we learn that Saul studied under him.

He was his teacher. And that he, Gamaliel, was well-educated, scripture tells us, in the law of his ancestors, and Paul became that as well.

So in Acts 23 and 26, later on, we learn that he was the son of a Pharisee, Saul was. He followed his father's footsteps and became a strict Pharisee himself.

So that was his background, that was his training, that was his education. And we learn in Galatians 1 that he was top of his class, essentially. He was above many of his peers in his studies, in his diligence, in his focus.

In Acts 18, verses 1 to 3, we learn that he was also a tent maker. So like many others who served the church at that time, they had another trade.

[13:11] They had another thing that supported them in their ministry work. And it came in handy in interacting with people. So what about his character? What about his personality?

What was he like? Well, there's a great deal of support for the idea, both at this time in Acts and throughout his ministry, he was intense.

Is that fair? He was focused, always focused on what he believed, because he submitted to God, what he believed to be right, what he believed to be true, what he believed to be in line with, what he perceived God's will was.

So he considered Jewish law at this time to be the most important thing for him and for everyone. So when this movement to follow Jesus and the gospel of Christ began to grow, he became zealous in saying, no, wait a minute, that is contrary to this, which I have been trained in, which I believe, which I feel in every fiber of my being is God's will.

So he said, that is contrary to this, which I believe, I will stand against that. So while his perspective on serving God, seeking God's will, clearly changed over time, right?

[14:33] This is what we see in his development. Saul always saw himself as serving God with a clear conscience. He's very black and white in almost every way.

In his writing, in his communication style, very clear, very direct. So with his early life and training, Saul of Tarsus was on a fast track.

To put it in our contemporary terminology. He was on a fast track in his career, in his religious education, in his pursuit of faith as he believed it to be.

So it was in this sincere zeal in defending what he perceived to be the faith in God that he should follow. This led to his brief, thankfully, but very intense role as persecutor of the church.

So how does this all play out? Good question. As we learned in our last sermon in this series, Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen.

[15:35] He's mentioned by name. And in fact, as we heard this morning in Acts 1, Acts 1 picks right up where Acts, sorry, Acts 8 verse 1, pardon me. Acts 8 verse 1 picks, obviously, right up where Acts 7 finished.

And it says, and Saul approved of killing him, Stephen. So not only was Saul there, he had a role in it.

He approved of this happening. In Acts 22 verse 20, Paul actually says, and when the blood of your martyr, Stephen, was shed, it was shed, pardon me, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.

So we don't get that full picture in Acts 7. But here it is. Not only was he present, not only did he approve, there's a sense that he gave consent.

He also became the driving force, then, behind the directed and violent efforts that came next. Paul had a hand in it. Sorry, Saul.

[16:44] Oops. As we learned this morning then, after Stephen was buried, Saul began to destroy, Scripture says, destroy the church.

Going from house to house, Scripture says, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. He clearly didn't just disagree, right, and fold his arms and harumph at the back of the room. He was against, with everything he had, this new Jesus movement. He hated it. As Scripture said, right there, he wanted to destroy it.

Destroy is powerful word. Destroy doesn't mean, well, I'm not a big fan. Destroy means you want to obliterate it. You want to wipe it from existence.

offense. You find it more offensive than you can bear. So he wouldn't have likely done all this himself. That's what I thought to myself. Is Paul didn't go, or sorry, Saul didn't go on a Saul-only crusade of sorts where he tore everything down on his own.

[17:54] So he probably had like-minded colleagues. He maybe even had followers or students of his own who were also zealous towards the same goals that he had.

So this was a systematic, remember how I talked about Paul being intense and focused? This was a systematic and calculated effort we can see here.

Door-to-door identification and persecution. That's pretty thorough. And of Christians, seeking people who are followers of Christ to pull them out, draw them out, and make them pay.

So reflecting back on this time, Acts 22 verse 19 tells us they also went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat people who believed in Jesus.

So they went to homes, they went to places of worship, systematic and calculated effort. And if that wasn't enough, we learn in Acts 26 that Saul believed it was necessary to do everything he could that was contrary to the name, to stop what was contrary to the name of Jesus.

[19:06] To oppose the name of Christ in an active and intentional way. He made it his mission. So then, acting under the authority of the chief priests, Saul put followers of Jesus in prison.

He did his best even to have them executed when he had that influence in those decisions. He was focused and intense.

He was so obsessed with persecuting people, scripture even tells us that he hunted them down. He hunted them down in foreign cities such as Damascus, scripture tells us.

It wasn't just like, ah, get out of here. He was systematic and intense. So, later in his life, Saul, who we recognize to be the Apostle Paul, of course, he reflected on his actions at this time.

Reflected on his attitudes during this crusade of his. In Galatians 1.13, he says, for you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism.

[20:15] How intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. He also spoke in various other letters, giving a confession of sorts, talking about his zeal to persecute the church, his blasphemy, persecution, and influence towards God's true plan, which he came to understand.

So, this man who had been called Saul would come to realize that all he thought was right and true, as we talked about, he was fiercely intense in what he felt to be God's will and sticking to that.

This had more to do with his will and his pride than God's plan at all. Than God's will for his life, ultimately, at all.

It truly is a stunning reversal of attitude, perhaps one of the most dramatic in all of Scripture, probably the most dramatic.

Saul would ultimately be humbled by God. That man who came to consider himself to be the least of the apostles, often talk about that.

[21 : 27] Do you think of Paul as being the least of anything? He would have had a significant and long-lasting impact on the church, ultimately, and furthering the kingdom of God.

We're still talking about him today. That's a legacy. From being the worst enemy of the church, Paul would later become one of its best friends.

Saul, the persecutor, would soon become Paul, the preacher. And Paul attributed all of that, all of it, to the grace and mercy of God.

Everything in his story, and we'll come to see it more and more in the coming weeks, everything in his story was used by God. Every aspect of his life prior to his conversion prepared him for the task that the Lord gave him.

His Jewish heritage and Roman citizenship suited him for preaching to both Jews and Gentiles. His training by Gamaliel would serve him well in his writings on the law in the books of Romans and Galatians.

[22 : 37] His skill as a tent maker would support him and help him during his travels. And even his history as a persecutor would strengthen his testimony as an eyewitness of Christ and the amazing grace that is available to people who submit to him.

It would even prepare him for the contrary attacks and arguments of others. He did it himself. He was prepared to debate it. So what can we learn?

It's fine for me to talk about Saul. It's fine for me to say, oh, and he became the apostle Paul. Okay, everyone have a great week. But what does it mean to you? What does it connect to for you, for us?

What can we learn from this exploration of his early life? How can we better view our own lives and God's call on them? Well, you know I like puns.

Here's some food for thought for each of you to chew on. What are the ideas or causes that you are truly passionate about in your life? Do they come from your upbringing?

[23 : 48] Do they come from your relationships or from culture or from a dynamic relationship with God? Are the things that you're passionate about and drive your actions and your behaviors, are they of God or not?

Are we open to having, this is a big one, open to having our minds and hearts changed by God or others? Are we open? Are we humble?

Are we teachable? Are we willing to be humble? Even possibly coming to recognize that the things that we believe to be true, the things that we believe to be important to our personal values or convictions, may not ultimately align with God's will or his plan for our lives?

Are we open to that revelation? If God asks us to, ask you to, can you or will you lay everything at his feet?

Are you willing to submit everything that you believe most deeply, everything that has shaped your life so far, to God's will? Can you surrender complete authority to him?

[25 : 11] Perhaps the most important thing that I think we can learn from Saul and his conversion is that despite his intense and often violent persecution of the church, doesn't he serve as a wonderful example of God's mercy?

1 Timothy 1, 15-16 says, and this is Paul speaking here, this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief, he says. However, for this reason, I obtained mercy, that in me first, Jesus Christ might show all long suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on him for everlasting life.

God's grace was sufficient for Saul and it is sufficient for you and for me. My friends, hear these words, no matter where or who you have been, no matter how you have lived your life up to this point, you can be justified by God's grace.

grace. So, receive the Father's grace. It is a gift that he is giving you. Live as a redeemed child of God who is on mission with our Father to reach and save the world.

[26 : 47] Amen? Amen.