

## **“Jesus Converts His Greatest Opponent”**

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

**Text: Acts 9**

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IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are traveling through the book of Acts – the book of the Bible that records what happened to the Church after Jesus rose from the dead. A few weeks ago we heard how persecution against the Jerusalem Church went viral... A Pharisee by the name of Saul was going from house to house arresting and jailing anyone connected to Jesus. This same Saul had given his approval to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr – in fact he watched the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen.

We are told that all the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem – about 20 000 – fled the city and were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Despite this persecution – God was in complete control. He used that persecution to spread his Christians all over the area and as we have seen for the past few weeks, the Christians were spreading the good news about Jesus wherever they went and the church was growing. God took a situation that looked like it was bad for the church and turned it into something great. But God was about to do something even more amazing... something that would be hard for even the Christians to believe.

*Acts 9:1-2 beings in this way... “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*

*He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”*

Saul, that zealous Pharisee that was persecuting the church was still threatening Jesus' followers with death. It wasn't enough that he had caused all the Christians in Jerusalem to flee for their lives... Now he wanted to hunt them all down. He had asked for letter from the high-priest that gave him authority to go to surrounding cities – Damascus being one – and if he found any followers of Jesus attending the Jewish synagogues – he would arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners.

Every follower of Jesus knew about Saul. He was the reason they fled Jerusalem. He was feared and was considered enemy number one by the church. It wasn't enough that he had caused all the Christians to leave Jerusalem, now Saul was off to Damascus to continue persecuting the scattered followers of Jesus. It was clear that he wasn't going to stop until all of Jesus followers were rounded up, imprisoned, or worse.

*Acts 9:3-5 continues... “As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”*

As the world around us rages against what we believe and teach and confess it is sometimes easy for us as Christians to forget that it is our Lord Jesus who is risen from the dead and sitting at God's right hand with all authority in heaven and on earth. The early church was about to get a huge

reminder of who runs the show. And Saul's life was about to change in a way that he, and all who knew of him, would never believe.

Jesus himself stops Saul and his men as they travel to Damascus. A bright light flashes around Saul – he falls to the ground – and hears a voice speaking to him... *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"* When you persecute Jesus' church, you persecute Jesus. The church is the body of Christ and Jesus dwells in the church. The risen, glorified Jesus now calls Saul to account for what he is doing...

Saul asks a very natural question... *"Who are you, Lord?"* Saul asked. *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,"* he replied. Once again Jesus makes it clear to Saul – I am Jesus and you are persecuting me. Saul when you approved of stoning Stephen – you approved of stoning me. When you put my followers in jail, you put me in jail.

Of course Saul thought that Jesus was dead. It has been less than a year since Jesus was crucified. Saul had been trying to stop the Christians from going around proclaiming that Jesus was God's Son and had risen from the dead. Saul had been leading the charge in the persecution of the followers of Jesus. Now Saul is face to face with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

*Jesus gives him the following instructions... "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* Saul is now under the command of the Son of God. He gets his marching orders – "Get up – continue on into Damascus – and wait for my orders there."

What must have been going through Saul's heart and mind at that moment... Jesus really was the Son of God. Jesus really did rise from the dead. I have been working against God this entire time. I have been persecuting God's true followers this entire time. I've been completely wrong about

everything... murderous, hateful, and evil. What is God going to do to me now???

*Acts 9:7-9 continues... "The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything."*

Jesus leaves Saul blind. Perhaps it was a symbol of how blind he had been. Perhaps it was to make it clear to him that he had really seen Jesus, and that this vision wasn't just a bad episode or a mirage caused by the hot sun.

Either way, Saul is now led by the hands of his henchmen into Damascus. For the next three days Saul is left in darkness. He fasts – eating and drinking nothing – a sign of repentance – sorrow over sins committed against God.

*Acts 9:10- continues... "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "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." "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." 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."*

In Damascus there was a follower of Jesus named Ananias. Jesus called to him in a vision and told him to exactly where

to go to find Saul. Jesus instructs Ananias that he is to seek out Saul who is currently praying. Jesus reveals to Ananias that He has given Saul a vision of Ananias coming and placing his hands upon him to restore his sight.

Don't you just love Ananias' reply to Jesus. "Um Lord... I know this guy – he's not a nice guy. He didn't come here to pray with me, I'm sure of that." Ananias is not a fearless Christian – he's essentially confessing to Jesus that he is scared of Saul and what Saul will do to him if he walks knows he is a disciple of Jesus.

*"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."*

Jesus reveals his future plans for Saul to Ananias and to us. This Saul... this enemy and persecutor of the church of Jesus... is actually Jesus' chosen instrument. The very man who is trying to stomp out Jesus' name... The very man who is trying to stomp out Jesus' followers... The very man who is trying to stop people from believing that Jesus is the Risen Son of God... This very man is Jesus' chosen instrument to carry his name before Gentiles, kings, and even the Jewish people. Jesus adds – I'm going to show Saul how much he will suffer for me.

I think we often forget that we are dealing with God. Once again Jesus is about to do something that will demonstrate his power and his grace. It will be an unmistakable act of God... If we thought it was impressive that a sorcerer became a follower of Jesus because he was amazed at the power of Jesus name... If we thought it was impressive that God used a persecution to grow his church and spread his gospel... Then our minds are about to be blown away...

Jesus is now going to take his greatest enemy... a man responsible for murdering his followers...a man responsible for the largest persecution of the followers of Jesus to date... Jesus is going to make this man his greatest follower and servant. This man will spread the name of Jesus further than any other. This man will write most of the New Testament.

This man will realize that Jesus was and is the Son of God, that he rose from the dead, and that he redeemed the world. Most importantly this man will realize that Jesus loved him and forgave him and still wanted to use him. And through his writings this man will help countless others into the future, like you and me, realize that God is our Saviour.