

Acts 9:1-19

Easter 3; May 1 & 2, 2022

Saul was on his way to making a name for himself. He was a well-connected powerful man with great credentials. He came from parents who were wealthy. He grew up in a city called Tarsus near the Mediterranean Sea. Tarsus was also a thriving commercial and intellectual center. It was well known for its learning and philosophy. Tarsus was also a city that had been designated as a Roman “free city.” That meant that if you were a citizen of Tarsus, you would become a Roman citizen. However, becoming a citizen of Tarsus came with a price. According to an ancient writer, in order to be a citizen in Tarsus, a person had to pay the equivalent of a year and a half’s wages just to have the right to live there. That didn’t include a place to stay. Tarsus was an expensive place to live. Therefore, the citizens of Tarsus were the upper crust of society. They were the successful people of that day. Even though Saul’s parents were Jewish, they could have become a citizen of Tarsus because his parents were hard working and successful people.

That success enabled Saul to receive the best. He probably grew up in a home that offered some of the luxuries of that day. He was smart. He was intelligent. He lived in a city that offered him great education. Yet, he also was a Jew. When he needed a higher education to become a Pharisee, he was sent to Jerusalem to become a student under one of the greatest professors of that day, Gamaliel. It was under the instruction of Gamaliel that Saul was trained and prepared to be a Pharisee.

Even though the Pharisees were often made up of successful and well-off business men of that day, they had no time for Jesus and his followers. They held on tightly to the old ways and teachings of the Old Testament. Paul believed the same. To say that Saul was an enemy of the Christian Church would be an understatement. He was passionate about getting rid of Christians. Saul went about his task with a 110% of his being. Luke writes: **“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.”**

The word that Luke uses here for **“breathing out,”** is the same word that Jesus uses when he speaks about the person who built a house on a poor foundation: **“The winds BLEW and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”** (Mt. 7:25) In the chapter before our text, Luke writes about Saul: **“Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”** He was like a ferocious animal just wanting to tear the Christian Church apart. He was good at what he did. He thought he was doing all of this for his God.

He had become a rising star. He was a person who was getting noticed. Not only was he smart and respected, he also got things done. Saul was there when Stephen was the first martyr was stoned to death and gave his approval. When Saul would later tell his story, he would say: **“I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.”** (Acts 22:4-5)

Saul was getting the task done. Scholars have estimated that by the time of Saul, the Christian Church in Jerusalem had about 25,000 people in it. After Saul got done there, many of the Christians left or went underground. So, when we meet Saul in our text, he had gotten word that a larger group of Christians had fled to Damascus. So, he traveled the 150 miles, on foot, to continue his work. He later described his work when he wrote: **“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”** (Gal. 1:14)

Then on the way to Damascus, it all changed. **“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.”** Can you imagine how Saul felt when he found out that he had been so wrong? If this was true, then Saul deserved to be judged by God. If this is true, then Saul was a monster. He deserved to be struck down right then and now by God. Yet, Jesus tells Saul, whose name later is changed to Paul, that he came to die for Paul. Jesus wanted Paul to be certain of that message. Luke then tells us that Paul began to preach in the synagogues. Yet, somewhere after this Jesus himself would train Paul to serve him. Paul speaks about that

when he writes to the Galatians: **“But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.” (Gal. 1:15-18)**

Jesus loves us in exactly the same way. He loves you. There is no sin too great that is so great that he cannot forgive. Think about all the things that we do wrong. Think about the words that come pouring out of our mouths at times. Think of the people that we try to hurt with our words and actions. Think about all the sin that we do every day. God says that he forgives us. As far as the East is from the West is how far he has removed our sins from us. That’s the truth that Saul learned that day on the road to Damascus. God loves.

Meeting Jesus changes your life. It changed Paul. God was going to take this man, with all of those gifts, with all of his intelligence and passion turn him loose in the world. God would turn him from being a blasphemer to write all most half of the New Testament. He went from being a murderer to being called an Apostle. That’s how God works. It changes everything.

Jesus changes you. We tell the message of Jesus to people who need to hear his message of love, not because we have to but because we want to. We come here to confess our sins, and then be assured that they are forgiven by Jesus. He wants every single one of us to be part of that plan. That’s kind of crazy, isn’t it? But that’s how our God works. That’s the kind of God we have. May God bless us as we work together to share his love to this world. Amen.