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## SAUL OF TARSUS, THE PERSECUTOR

STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 28  
ACTS 8:1-4

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Here we get our first picture of Saul of Tarsus, who will later become Paul the Missionary. Here we see him antagonistic toward the Word of God and the early church. In this first glimpse of Saul of Tarsus we see his bitter antagonism to Christ's cause, but he is to become the greatest believer of all time. He was originally the worst sinner who ever lived. In this chapter we also see pictures of Philip the Evangelist and Simon the Sorcerer and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip the Evangelist was one of the early great servants of the Lord, but soon falls out of the picture in the printed record. Simon the Sorcerer had tremendous native ability and when he became a believer in Christ it was his native ability that ruined him. The essence of chapter 8 is this--a person who is great from a human viewpoint has every handicap in being great in the Lord's service. Some people look at a very talented and capable unbeliever and they exclaim, "My, if he or she were just a Christian, wouldn't that one make a great Christian!" Not necessarily so, for he probably would depend on himself and never would be oriented to the grace of God. It is always so easy for us to depend on human ability and human genius.

### Saul of Tarsus

The Saul mentioned here is a member of the Sanhedrin and will eventually be the twelfth apostle. He is the one who will take the place of Judas Iscariot. We see three factors in his background. (Phil. 3:4-9) Saul had a great heritage. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the outstanding tribes. Benjamin was one of the great warrior tribes. They were great Jewish leaders. They lived up to the law more than any other tribe. Saul was very self-righteous and religious. The second factor (1 Timothy 1:12-16) reveals to us that Saul of Tarsus was the worst sinner who ever lived as an unbeliever. We get this estimate of him from a statement in Scripture. Why was Saul the chief of sinners? Because he was a self-righteous and religious bigot and performed many deeds in the name of religion. The worst people in the world today are religious people and self-righteous people. Paul is pictured here in his most evil self--he was glad that Stephen was dying. Saul of Tarsus had completely rejected the idea of the grace of God. Saul heard the gospel from Stephen and he rejected it. Saul's training and background was religion and self-righteousness. He was proud of his accomplishments at such an early age. Everybody was talking about this brilliant young genius from Tarsus and he was so fat-headed and proud he could hardly contain himself. So he rejected the gospel out and out and would not believe it until he heard it from the lips of Christ.

When Saul met Christ on the Damascus Road he expressed positive volition and accepted Jesus Christ. So here in Saul's early life we meet the two conflicting views of grace and legalism. Grace means that God does all the doing, God gets the credit and we are the recipients. In legalism it is just the opposite. In legalism we do all the doing, we get the credit and God receives the results. Saul was keeping the letter of the law and he expected God to get the glory from all he was doing. Saul heard the gospel but he rejected it because he was under the power of religion and self-righteousness. When it says, "Saul was consenting to his death" it means that this was Saul's fixed attitude. No doubt Saul was quite jealous of this brilliant Stephen.

ACTS 8:1 "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles." "And at that time" means that a great persecution came on the church in Jerusalem. But it also refers to the fact that as long as a person is alive he has hopes of salvation and salvation is a possibility for every person who is living. Sometimes those who resist the hardest, when once they become believers, they become the greatest



followers of Christ. Saul was a hot-headed legalist. He hated the church. He was glad to see them stone Stephen to death. It was a great riddance of bad rubbish as far as he was concerned. But the great hater is going to become the great lover. The only way Saul of Tarsus could be changed was through the power of the Gospel. No one person can change another person. It takes the Gospel to make a sinner into a saint. The Gospel is a part of Bible doctrine. It is the dynamite of God. I think the tragedy of our day is that doctrine is so neglected by believers. The Gospel is just the beginning part of the plan God had for Saul's life. It is the starting point, but just the starting point, and you have to go on beyond the Gospel of salvation if you are going to become a powerful and effective Christian. You have to learn doctrine and keep learning it all the rest of your life. This is the only way Christians can grow. So many accept Christ, get their little cup full, and never learn doctrine. You have to study and study and study and keep learning day by day and month by month. You have to put Christ first if you are going to learn doctrine. So many people try to give their children culture, and they keep them out of Bible School and Sunday School and send them to other things so they can get "culture". But remember, culture won't sustain you in the time of stress and strain. When you get in real trouble, remember, it is not Immanuel Kant's "Catagorical Imperatives", or "The Causes of the French Revolution in 1795", or "Burke's Great Discourse on the French Revolution" which will sustain you. It will sustain you about like the boy on the burning deck. Education has its advantages, but it won't sustain you in the time of need. The only thing that will sustain you is doctrine. Doctrine from the Word of God will sustain you. When Jesus was hanging on the cross God could not deliver him, elect angels couldn't, and his friends couldn't. The one thing that sustained him was doctrine--"Thou hast magnified thy word above thy name". It was doctrine that sustained Christ as he died on that cross. Now what is your life? What is it that sustains you? Once Saul of Tarsus was changed from the worst sinner to the greatest believer he built his life on Bible doctrine. From the human standpoint, doctrine--from the divine standpoint, grace. "Man shall not live by bread alone." Bread is necessary but the real sustenance comes from the Word of God. Man is either going to live by doctrine or he will not live at all. People jump on the panic button and don't know what they are going to do. Paul got with doctrine and he tells us in Phil. 4 that he had learned how to be abased and how to abound. He had to learn. Once Paul learned Bible doctrine his life was on the way to greatness.

Let me lay it on the line with you, for you are my sheep and I am your shepherd. In every sermon I am giving you Bible doctrine. You ought to move heaven and earth to see to it that you do not miss one single service while I am attempting to teach you the Word of God. You will change and become happy and relaxed and wonder how you ever got along before you learned Bible doctrine. Christians fall apart because they don't know Bible doctrine.

Let us read for a moment 2 Cor. 11:24-28 "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches." This is just a little outline of the real sufferings of Paul. Well how did he take it.

Let us read Phil. 4:11-13 "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Paul said " I HAVE LEARNED". It means he had learned doctrine and he kept on being content on that basis. The difference in any two believers is Bible doctrine. You have to stay with it all the time. Parents talk about giving their children "advantages". My friend, the greatest advantage you can give your child is give them Bible doctrine. Saul of Tarsus is the Bible's greatest illustration of what Bible doctrine will do to a man. Stephen was a great theologian. Later Peter and John will get doctrine. But Saul of Tarsus will replace the great theologian of the church, namely Stephen. How can such a conversion take place? The answer is this--it takes place by the grace of God and by doctrine in the mind. Bible doctrine changes you. This great persecution in the early church was being led by Saul of Tarsus. Bible doctrine is going to change all this.

Let us read 1 Timothy 1:12-16 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." This is the explanation for the change in Saul of Tarsus.

ACTS 8:2 "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him." "Devout men" comes from the Greek word which means to take in something good. These men had taken in Bible doctrine. They had been taught doctrine. But Saul of Tarsus could have stood on the grave of Stephen and said, "I'm real glad you are dead". But there were those who were going to miss Stephen, for he had taught them. Their lamentation over him showed their genuine regret over his death. They were mourning the loss of a great Bible teacher. Putting flowers on a grave doesn't mean much. Mainly, flowers are for the living, not the dead. Pay your respects to the dead then get up and move on. The thing that would make Stephen happy was for them to get up and move on about God's work. Bury your loved one, dry your eyes, and get up and go on about the work of Christ.

ACTS 8:3 "As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison." Saul made havoc (devastated the church). He evidently had a warrant for their arrest. "Haling" means dragging them to prison. He is doing this in the name of religion. They kept on putting them in prison. Remember this later on when he comes back to Jerusalem and it scares the people to death. Barnabas had to tell them over and over again that Saul of Tarsus was really saved, and had really become Paul the preacher. They just fainted dead away when they saw him back in Jerusalem. And every time Paul came back to Jerusalem he got into trouble. He persecuted the church--then he became a man of the grace of God and the church persecuted him. The Judaizers followed him all over the world hounding him.

ACTS 8:4 "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." This is now the fulfillment of the great commission. Up to this time it had been just Jerusalem. Now the church is going to be scattered and the message will go out to Judaea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.