

A Killer Comes To Christ - Part 1

Introduction

A former medical missionary in China, beautifully exemplified Christlike love. A beggar had come to the hospital badly burned, but no one was willing to donate skin for a graft. So the next morning the nurses were surprised to learn that the operation had been performed. Then they noticed that the Dr. was limping and realized that she had surgically removed some of her own skin to save the victim's life. They were amazed at such a sacrifice, for they couldn't understand why she would do that for a total stranger. Later, this gallant missionary again manifested a selflessness that profoundly impressed the Chinese people. As she was being led to prison, she saw a little boy bruised and bleeding. Immediately she broke away from her captors, and kneeling down she bound up the youngster's wound. A few hours afterward she was executed. Many years have passed, and people in China still talk about the foreign doctor whose loving concern for others made them think of Jesus.

Martyrdom is not extinct. Neither is it new. It has been going on since the days of Stephen, the first man ever to die for the cause of Christ.

But what of the killers? What of those who carry out the cruel and senseless executions of those whose only crime is that they love Jesus more than life? Do they get away with their crime against God and man? How does God deal with them? *When* does God deal with them? Why does He so often wait to avenge the deaths of His people?

The first Christian martyr was Stephen. His story is in Acts 7. The first Christian *killer* was Saul. I want to look with you at his story.

Young Saul was an upwardly mobile Cilician Jew from Tarsus. His brilliance and zeal had already distinguished him in the religious mentality of Judaism. A "*Hebrew of Hebrews,*" who "*lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of his religion,*" he would later say of himself.

He viewed the fledgling religion of Christianity in his day as a hoax. He saw those who called themselves Christians as ignorant and misguided fools following an imposter Messiah. Once Christianity spilled over its Jerusalem banks out into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria, he considered it a threat that must be stopped. So strong was Saul's conviction against Jesus of Nazareth that he dedicated himself to elimination of his followers. Stephen, a young preacher from Jerusalem, was the first of many victims who would encounter the murderous fury of Saul of Tarsus.

Shortly after the Bible's description of Stephen's death we read these words in Acts 8:3,

"But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."

Of himself Saul would later say in Acts 22:19 when he remembered these events:

". . . in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed..."

And again in Acts 26:10&11, he said,

"And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."

We have these detailed descriptions of Saul's persecution of the early church in our New Testaments because this killer was *turned*. That's right-he actually became a disciple of Jesus himself! So thoroughly did he turn, I might add, that he became probably the *most zealous Christian who ever lived*. That same cold laser gunsight of zeal that once was trained on Christians was re-targeted on the first century world that did not know Christ.

In Isaiah 55:8, God says, *"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD."* Nowhere can that be seen more clearly than in the case of Saul of Tarsus. You see, when someone has done as much evil as Saul had done, man thinks, "There can be no redemption. It has gone too far. The damage is too great." God, who thinks differently than man not only forgave Saul, but put him into His service. Two thirds of your New Testament is his writing.

His conversion to Christ stands even today, nearly two thousand years later, as a powerful testimony to what God can do in the life of a sincere man or women who turns away from sin and determines to serve God with their whole heart. Saul would ultimately become a martyr himself - dying for the faith he once persecuted.

But we're at the beginning of it all in this message. I want us to look at Saul's conversion. You'll find it described in four places in the New Testament: Acts 9, Acts 22, Acts 26, and Galatians 1. With that many descriptions, it is as though the Holy Spirit has said, "I want you to take some time and examine the case of this man." That we shall do if God allows. We will look at the Acts 9 passage in this message. I've called it **"A Killer Comes to Christ."**

We'll consider first Saul's involvement in:

I. A Ravaging Persecution.

(Read Acts 9 v. 1-2)

That little word "*Yet or still*" in verse 1 echoes some of the events I have already described to you. Saul was not the kind of man to give up until he accomplished *all* of his murderous intent.

In this phase of his deadly work he gets word that some of the Christians have fled Jerusalem and shown up in Damascus, a city about 135 miles northeast. Historians tell us that the city held a population of about forty thousand Jews and could have had as many as thirty or forty synagogues. Since the Christians would be trying to spread their teaching among their Jewish brethren, Saul must have reasoned that it would be worth the one-week trip north to put a stop to it. So he got letters of authority from the high priest which, in that day, would amount to open warrants of arrest for any that were suspected of being followers of Jesus. Both Julius and Augustus Caesar had granted the high priest authority over Jews in foreign cities and now Saul had that authority in his hands on parchment, bearing the seal of the high priest. He departed Jerusalem, little knowing how different his life would be when he returned to the Holy City. You see, before he arrived in Damascus, he experienced:

II. A Remarkable Confrontation.

(Read v. 3-4)

Some people picture Saul traveling on horseback when they read this. Others picture him on a camel or in a chariot or perhaps on foot. The Bible isn't specific about that. It does say that there were men traveling with him - perhaps soldiers or members of the temple guard. A sudden flash of blinding light that Paul says in Acts 26:13 was "*brighter than the sun*" interrupted their travel.

Those who cannot accept the supernatural descriptions of Bible events say that this was a flash of lightning. Maybe so, but then such persons usually go on to try to say that the bolt of electricity must have hit Saul and that the subsequent thunderclap was mistaken by him in his stupor for Jesus speaking to him. Some try to explain this event away by saying that Saul was effected by sunstroke. Let me tell you something, folks. Lightning bolts and sunstrokes don't change a man's whole life to the extent that he totally *scraps* one belief system and adopts another. What is described here is *supernatural*, if not the blinding light, then the words that were heard:

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Notice that Jesus takes it *personally* when someone persecutes His people. Saul was persecuting Christians but Jesus said the zealous Pharisee was persecuting *Him*. When God's people suffer unjustly, don't think it goes unnoticed. And don't think that the suffering will not be avenged. Maybe now, maybe later, but you don't persecute God's people without serious

consequences.

Saul is really quite confused at this point as to what is going on.

(Read v. 5-6)

The instructions were to get up and go on into the city limits of Damascus and wait for further guidance.

Let me stop there and ask a question. Was Saul now a Christian? Some like to believe he was. They look at verse 5 and say, "Well, he called Jesus 'Lord,' didn't he? So he *must* have been a Christian at that point." So they go on to talk about the "instantaneous conversion of Saul." But look at verse 5 again:

"Who art Thou, Lord?"

Saul didn't even know to whom he was talking yet. How could it be said he was a Christian?

The fact is that the word there for "*Lord*" can just as accurately be translated "*Sir*," which probably, to our English speaking minds, would better reflect Saul's distant relationship to this so-far-anonymous voice that is speaking to him.

Of course, Jesus did reveal His identity. "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*" But surely no one would assert that simply knowing Jesus' identity is all that is necessary for salvation. The demons knew who Jesus was. They even confessed that He was the Son of God. Yet they are not saved. Listen to the demons speak in Matthew 8:29:

"And behold, they cried out, saying, 'What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?'"

Romans 10:14 we have that question: "*And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?*" Indeed... that is my question for those who conclude that Saul was now a Christian: How could Saul place his faith (trust) in Jesus when, at this point, he knew so very little about Him (other than a bunch of distorted facts that he used to justify his persecution of Christians)? Later in the passage, God would send a preacher, Ananias, to tell Saul about Jesus. It is then that he was called to make a decision to accept or reject salvation.

By the way, the reason I brought up this issue is that some are so insistent that Saul was a Christian immediately because they want to avoid the obvious implications of his baptism described later in this passage. When we get to verse 18 of this chapter, we'll see that Saul was baptized, something that bothers a lot of people who relegate the command to be baptized to the status of unimportant and unnecessary. You see, if they cannot get Saul saved before his

baptism they have a real difficulty explaining why Ananias connected baptism up with the forgiveness of sins.

Tuck that away in your mind. We'll get back to it later in the passage.

Well, what about the others who were with Saul?

(Read v. 7-8)

Can you imagine the impact of all this on Saul's mind? He now knows that the voice he heard was that of Jesus - the One he thought was dead and buried. Can you guess his thoughts? "I've been wrong! I've killed these people! I've made them blaspheme! Stephen was right but I wouldn't listen! I'm responsible for his death and the deaths of many others. They're God's children and not the heretics I thought..."

There is a lesson to be learned here. Is sincerity enough to get you to heaven? If so, then Saul was qualified to go to heaven without Christ because he was very sincere in what he believed. But you see *he believed the wrong thing!* It is important *what* we believe. There is truth and there is error, lies.

In our day people don't like to believe that truth is absolute. To them truth is what you *want* to believe as long as you are sincere. Consequently, they believe no one has the right to say that another is wrong. Ever heard that before?

You won't find a more sincere man than Saul of Tarsus. But he was *sincerely wrong!*

Listen to the way Saul put it later when he was Paul the Apostle. He is referring to the sincerity of his Jewish brethren in Romans 10:1-3 when he says,

"Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."

Many of the Jewish people, like Saul, were *sincere* in their religion. But they were *sincerely wrong*. It *does* make a difference what you believe so you'd better get your nose in that Bible and study it while you can. You better question what you believe from time to time with your growing understanding of God's absolute truth.

The second part of the sincerity lesson I want to point out is this: *When a sincere person finds out*

he is wrong he will change.

Saul's conversion would mean *starting over*. He would have to denounce the belief system he had grown up with. If we are sincere in what we believe and we discover new truth that disproves what we have held before, if we do not embrace the new truth, we cease to be sincere. We become *hypocrites*. Saul of Tarsus knew that. I say that because later in his writings to the Philippians he would say,

"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ..."

I have heard people say "I understand what you are telling me and I see it in the Bible, but I've just got too many years in what I have been taught. I just can't do it. I can't change."

Sometimes, too, unwillingness to change has to do with a supposed loyalty to Mom and Dad.

A man who operated a general store had a yardstick nailed on his counter top. Here he measured his rope, cloth, and other goods as they were sold. After his death his son took over the store.

One day an employee of the Department of Weights and Measures came by and examined his yardstick. He found it to be a full inch less than a yard in length. All those years the old gentleman running the store had honestly thought his measure was accurate, but it wasn't. His son now faced a decision. He could refuse to admit his father was wrong and thus, be wrong himself, or he could say, "My father honestly thought he was right. I now know something he didn't know. If I don't live up to that knowledge I will not be as honest as he was."

Strange as it may seem many people today, when it comes to religion, reason according to the first choice this young man had. They *"learn the Word of God more accurately"* than their parents, but refuse to change because they fear any change from their parent's religion would be an unfavorable reflection on mom and dad. Such persons need to be asked a penetrating question: If mom and dad were as honest as it is believed and they had been confronted with truth they had not seen before, would they have accepted it? If not, they were less than honest. If so, the best way to be true to the legacy of their honesty is to do likewise. One who is true to honest parents will change if new truth comes into focus.

I remind you, truth is absolute. It isn't adjustable. Yes, we all believe we're "entitled to our opinions," but that doesn't change error into truth. Jesus said *"the truth will make you free."* He did not have in mind a shape-shifting mass of relative "truth" we see around us. He spoke of a *truth*. Anything that does not line up with that is *false*.

Are you a sincere person? Then you will *sincerely* be concerned about the truth and you will hold to it, no matter what comes. Anything less and you're a *hypocrite*. So don't keep fooling yourself

about what you are. And don't fool yourself about where you are going either. If you are hypocrite you will not live with God forever.

Jesus, in talking about the unfaithful servant in his parable in Matthew 25:51 said the man was to be assigned to a place with hypocrites. And what is the assigned place of hypocrites? Jesus said it was the place where there was "*weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" That's hell, my friend. So please, for the sake of your own soul, *don't be a hypocrite!* If you discover you're wrong, change!

Do you suppose some of these thoughts must have gone through Saul's mind? He had three days to think about it before he was spoken to again and told what he needed to do.

(Read v. 9)

One who skips his meals for three days is a troubled man! Don't think that times of trouble where you have to totally rethink your position of certain things are to be despised. They can be valuable times in your life, though, admittedly, they can also be difficult times.

God knows that, too, because though He was making arrangements behind the scenes to send a preacher to go talk to Saul, Saul heard *nothing* for three days. He didn't know but that his death was eminent as punishment for the way he had been treating God's people. After all, he had been killing them. Certainly God would be justified in taking his life in return.

Saul was yet to learn about *God's mercy*, a mercy that would not only be shown to him but can also be shown to everyone living today. In its offered form, this mercy is called *grace*. Grace is a *favor* that someone does for you when you don't deserve it.

Someone has offered this penetrating comparison of the difference between revenge, justice, and grace. If someone brutally murders your son and you take things into your own hands, that's revenge. If you're content to allow the law and the courts to arrest and punish the offender, that's justice. But if you pardon the murderer, adopt him, and take him home to live with you as your son, that's grace!

That is what God would ultimately do for Saul of Tarsus!

We'll have to finish this story tonight. Before we leave this passage, let me read to you Saul's comments made later about the grace and mercy that God offered to him and offers to all people today as well. These words are found in Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter one, verse 12-15...

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service; even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of

our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."

If God can reach out and offer mercy and salvation to a violent killer of Christians, He can offer it to you and me as well. And He does! That is the good news. That is the message of the gospel.

Conclusion

"God helps those who can't help themselves." That is certainly what he did for Saul and that is certainly what he can do for you... God helps those who *cannot* help themselves.

Do you need His forgiveness? Are you willing to come to Him?