
3. The Chief of Sinners

Acts 8:1-4; Acts 9:1-9 & 1 Timothy 1:12-17

The outward (physical) Account of Saul's Conversion

Acts 8:1-4

And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Acts 9:1-31

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

The Inward (Spiritual) Account of Saul's Conversion

1 Timothy 1:12-17

² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. ^[a] Amen.

The Great Commission

The early church was spreading and growing. The growing band of believers had everything in common and shared amongst themselves. They resolved their disputes (Acts 6) and there was peace amongst them.

Acts 2:44-47

⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The believers were content to share in all things and to have all things in common. They lived in harmony, praying, visiting the temple, and telling others of the Good News. By all accounts, they had the perfect environment, and got along in ways that we could only dream about. But Jesus had told them to go into all of the world. The Gospel wasn't meant to stay in Jerusalem it was meant to be shared. The Power of the Holy Spirit was to make witnesses throughout the world.

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

God accomplished His Plan through Persecution

God accomplished His plan through the persecution of the early church. The early band of believers were supposed to go into all of the world and spread the Gospel. God provided the environment for this by allowing the persecution of the early followers of Christ.

This is not unusual behavior for God. Look at the current spread of Christianity in China. For 50 years China was cut-off from missionaries and any form of Eastern involvement. Isolated, and persecuted, their government was determined to lead their country in isolation. This would be considered by all to be less than ideal circumstances for the spread of the Gospel, but less than 40 years later, China is poised to become the largest Christian nation within this generation.

"China's Protestant community, which had just one million members in 1949, has already overtaken those of countries more commonly associated with an evangelical boom. In 2010 there were more than 58 million Protestants in China..."

(Taken from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>)

The Gospel spreads best in persecution, as God's people rely on God to accomplish His purpose. **When the Church of God is under persecution we don't dabble in prayer and major in strategy or vision, or our plans. When we are under fire, persecuted, afraid, alone and in need we turn to the Creator of the Universe for help and He promises to never leave.**

"Satan dreads nothing but prayer. His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, he mocks our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray."

— [Samuel Chadwick](#) – The Path of Prayer

Acts 8:3-4

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

I think this is an important concept to grasp because it seems that God continually accomplishes His best work in the midst of the most difficult conflicts. Saul was truly a "chosen instrument of God's as He participated in the events (persecution) that caused the church to spread into the Gentile lands – even before he was converted.

Man says: "If you're not for us you're against us."

God says: "I work all things together for good."

Why was Saul Converted?

The Conversion of Saul is a well-documented account in Scripture. Acts recounts the event in Acts 9:1-31 and then in Acts 22 & 26 recounts Paul's telling of the account. Three times in the book of Acts alone the conversion of Paul is recounted. In all three of these accounts the story is the same, but the telling of the story is different. This seems to confirm the credibility of the author, and the genuineness of the story.

Paul himself tells us about His conversion in Acts 22 & Acts 26, but in 1 Timothy he tells us why God converted Him. This is important, because we can all speculate on what we think God might have wanted to show us in the conversion of Saul, but Saul himself tells us what God wanted to show – I think I'll stick with that.

In 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Saul recounts his conversion and tells us that prior to his conversion he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a insolent opponent of the church. Saul not only persecuted the church, he approved of the killing of Stephen, He acquired official endorsements to haul off believers to prison, many of whom died there or were executed.

Acts 9:1-2

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Saul was the number one threat to the new group of believers. He was on His way to Damascus to imprison believers. Along the way Jesus met him and changed his life. I think it's important to notice that Saul continued on his journey to Damascus after his conversion – although now blinded by his encounter with Christ, and seeking the assistance of those whom he was sent to capture and imprison.

So why was Saul converted? Why did God meet Saul and convert him instead of strike him down on the road to Damascus?

Saul tells us that God called Saul to himself to show one specific thing - **his patience towards man**. He makes the case that God pardoned the “Chief of sinners” to show God’s patience towards man’s sin.

[Read]

1 Timothy 1:12-17

² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy **for this reason, that in me**, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. ^[a] Amen.

To Show God’s Perfect Patience

What is the reason for God’s grace towards Saul? That God might show His perfect patience towards those who were to believe (future) in him for Eternal life. What does this mean? That if God is willing to save one of the most unlikely sinners – one who persecuted (and killed) Christians, He is willing to save you.

We have all sinned – and society makes us think that some sins are worse than others. Yes, some sins have larger consequences than others, but all sin is an offence to God. The basis for all sin is a desire to be like God – to do our own thing and to ignore God’s rule in our life. The basis for all sin is the desire to be like God.

We need to grasp this concept because this is the essence of Grace. God allows for all to repent. If Saul could repent and be saved, after killing Christians, how big is God’s patience with us?

Romans 3:23-28 tells us the same concept in a little more detail. God “passed over” former sins that He might justify us, but the blood of Christ pays for those sins too that God might still be just.

Romans 3:23-28

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

God has to punish sin – if He is just. He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. He is the righteous judge and needs to avenge sin. God judged sin on the cross so that He might be just – punishing sin. If God did not judge sin He would not be a just judge.

However, God is also merciful, and wishes all to come to repentance – so he is patient towards us and God passed over former sins: If God didn't then he would have wiped out the human race as soon as Adam and Eve sinned, but He was merciful towards us and not willing that any would perish.

1 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

However, punishment will arise. God will not ignore sin – he will judge it. He needs to be just and if we do not repent from our sin and turn to Jesus – if we do not accept His offer to take our place and pay the price for our sin then we are left without excuse for God's judgment and will pay the price for our own sin. The very next verse 1 Peter 3:10 tells if this judgement that is “stored up” for the unrighteous

1 Peter 3:10

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

How does this apply to us?

We all hope and pray that our children will never have a time of rebellion against the Lord. That they will transition from a faith that of their parents to a faith that is their own. We pray that God holds their hearts firmly and does not allow them to stray – but we know they will sin, and we know they will turn from God at times to seek their own ways – that’s our nature.

The Just and the Justifier

We must firmly implant in them an awareness of two things: That God is the justifier and that He is just.

God is the Justifier:

God sent Jesus to pay the price for all sin. That means former sin and future sin. It means small sin (if there is such a thing) and large sin. That means secret sin, and public sin. That means intentional sin, and unintentional sin. That means selfish sin, and selfless sin. All sin. God send Jesus to justify us through the redemption of His blood. God is patient and is willing to forgive. That there is never a time when God says I don’t want you. There is never a time when God will say your sins are too great, or too many, or too difficult. God always loves them and that they are a child of the King.

Romans 3:24

And we are... “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,”

God is Just:

There will be a time of judgment. God will not allow sin to go unpunished. The Gospel is not a message that tells us that Jesus paid the price for all sin so don’t worry about it. If God does not judge sin then He is a terrible judge and an unrighteous god. This is impossible. God is Just & the justifier – He is will not allow sin to go unjudged.

Revelation 20:11-15

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.