

From Beast to Priest - How Saul Became Small (Paul)

It can be easy to consider the Apostle Paul and think only of a great man of God who did so many wonderful things for the furtherance of the gospel, yet to really know Paul, we would have to ask the Holy Spirit to show us the profound conversion that left a man once named Saul forever changed. In this article, I have endeavored to only touch upon the basic points of Paul's conversion experience so that the Holy Spirit Himself can take every open heart into the profound reality of the Cross that Paul knew and deeply effect us personally.

"When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But Stephen, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Act 7:54 – 60



Here we find Stephen like a defenseless lamb, forgiving the very ones stoning him to death. Jesus the Lamb is in Stephen manifesting the true Gospel before Saul's eyes.

Saul was standing tall as a righteous man and judge, approving and joining with the mob that was descending upon Stephen to destroy him. Saul was great in his own eyes. He was important. He was learned. He was a defender of the faith. The true spirit of Saul's "greatness" manifested the days he participated in the slaughter of those weak and foolish Jews in that new sect called "Christianity".



"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison."

Act 8:3

The ones that Saul was hunting down were those of the fragile and struggling first church. They were known to the Romans as a religious sect and to the Jews as a dangerous faction. These first fruits of the new birth sat trembling under the threats of strong enemies committed to destroying them. One of the leading terrors was a man named Saul from Tarsus. Saul was a Pharisee who committed himself to eliminating all those whom he deemed foolish enough to follow a Messiah that ended up crucified as a criminal and heretic. Saul breathed out slaughter against any who would choose to become a disciple of this weak and impotent Messiah.

"And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem."

Act 9:1-2

In Philippians chapter 3 and verse 5 Paul described his past identity as: *"circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee"*. One might suppose that to such a highly trained scholar and Pharisee, the thought of any Jew believing the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets was found in a crucified Messiah from Nazareth was preposterous and infuriating. He set his course to purge these foolish weak Jews from the face of the earth. Saul was like a beast devouring defenseless lambs.

"I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."

Acts 22:4-5



Saul of Tarsus was a strong man, a beast. He breathed out slaughter and consumed others by the force of his nature. He was a devourer clothed in self-righteousness and pride. He was like a wolf devouring the sheep of God's flock. He saw his actions as just and his cause as righteous. Oh, how deeply Saul must have felt the force of that old nature of self pushing him forward and hurting others. What a contrast he must have experienced between his pride and strength compared to the defenseless lambs he was persecuting.

Interestingly enough, after conversion, this same man who once handed his own brethren over to death would have himself accursed from God for their salvation (Romans 9:1-3). One must ask this question: WHAT happened in Saul to make him so utterly changed?

Saul needed more than just forgiveness and a strong counseling session. Paul needed what only the Crucified Christ he was persecuting could give him. I believe it is at this point in the story that we might consider pausing and asking the Lord to open our hearts in a new way to the wonder and power of the Cross of our Lord Jesus...



"And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do."

Acts 9:4-6

God Himself confronted Saul with the reality that Saul was persecuting Jesus, the true Lord and Christ of God. Saul was astonished. He was trembling. He was low and fallen from his high place. He was blind and no longer seeing from his self-righteous views. He was ready to listen. He was open to receive from God. He was ready to for the Cross of Christ to become the power of God in his own life (1 Cor. 1:18).



"And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink".

Acts 9:9

Saul needed to be crucified, redeemed by the Lamb of God. Saul needed to be redeemed by the very thing that he once raged against... the weak defeated Messiah in the shame of crucifixion. Saul became Paul through the Cross. For three days and nights he remained overcome in the reality of what that Cross really accomplished. He saw his own death, burial and resurrection in the offering up of God's Son. Paul saw and identified so deeply and personally into the Cross of Christ that he declared in one of his epistles, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20).



"And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."

Acts 9:10-16

After Saul opened to the deep inward power of the Cross of Christ, he was transformed from a vessel of pride and slaughter to a vessel of that would bear the very nature of the Lamb and be slaughtered daily for others (II Cor. 4:10). The man once named Saul was now called Paul, which is translated "small".

I wonder if Paul ever forgot the days when he was part of those who breathed slaughter and persecuted the lambs of God's flock? I believe Paul saw to his core what he was apart from Christ, and it seared into his being a determination to never let go of the Cross of his own death (I Cor. 2:2).

Paul knew that the only way he could reemerge back into public was to do so in weakness, in the very nature of the Crucified Messiah he once persecuted. He no longer came in his own strength and wisdom, but in the weakness and foolishness of the Lamb of God. He was no longer the "Saul of high stature" but the man named "Paul" who relied on the Lamb of God inside of him to be his life (Gal. 2:20).

May we open our hearts and ask the Lord to reveal the power of His Cross in us in a way we have yet to experience. May we say along with Paul, "I am crucified with Christ" and know with certainty that it is the Lamb of God who now lives in us. Amen.