



(Part One)

Saul of Tarsus (as the Apostle Paul was known before his conversion) seemed the most unlikely person to embrace the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet he did. And his conversion testifies that there is no one beyond the reach of God's love, mercy and grace. There are no **'hopeless cases'**; there is no one God cannot save.

Scripture provides several snapshots of the life of this man, revealing his violent opposition to the message that God had reconciled the world unto himself through a crucified Christ and that one could be saved only through Jesus.

Saul did not hold the view that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Neither did he favour the notion **'live and let live'**. He was a strong defender of the Jewish law.

The young church soon found that persecution was to become their daily companion. The first Christian martyr was Stephen. He proclaimed the good news about Jesus:

"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him... they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." (Acts 7:54-58)

Saul would later recall: **"And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him." (Acts 22:20)** Stephen died because he proclaimed the gospel.

At Saul's instigation, a wave of persecution against the church broke out. **"And Saul was there, giving approval to his [Stephen's] death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." (Acts 8:1-3)**

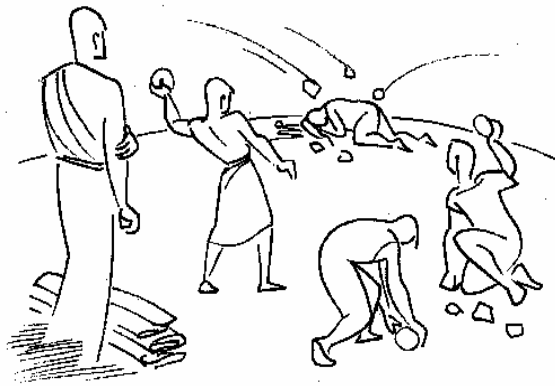
Luke records his fanaticism: **"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem." (Acts 9:1-2)**

Saul's behaviour sprang from his strong conviction that Jesus was not the promised Messiah and that these disciples were leading people away from God and, therefore, deserved to die.

We all find ourselves in disagreement with others on a wide range of issues, but we don't set about killing those whose views are different than ours. On this particular issue, tolerance was not in Saul's vocabulary.

It was not his intention simply to scare the disciples of Jesus. He recalls how intensely he "persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it." (Galatians 1:13)

This was the action of a man who hated those who believed that the Messiah had come, and who completely rejected the apostles' teaching about the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Saul was sincere, but completely misguided.



Saul approved of his murder. (Acts 8.1)

(Part Two)

The persecution carried out by Saul was foretold by Jesus: "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me." (John 16:1-2)

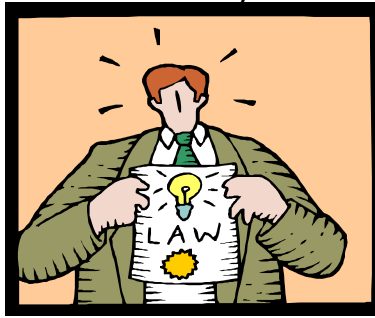
If Saul were asked, "Do you know the Father?" he would have confidently affirmed that he did. Furthermore, if he had been asked how he thought the Father viewed the persecution of the church, he would have said that the Father approved.

This is borne out by his remarks when he was on trial before Felix: "I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man." (Acts 24:16)

The pursuit of a clear conscience did not begin when he became a follower of Jesus; throughout his life he had tried to live according to his conscience, but during his persecution of the church his conscience was misinformed.

Later, in his trial before King Agrippa, he said, "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them." (Acts 26:9-11)

His remark "I too was convinced" shows he knew where his accusers were coming from, for that is exactly how he once thought. He had been where they were.



Living By Rules

As a Pharisee, Paul practised a legalistic religion. He had received his education from the leading authority at that time. "Under Gamaliel," he said, "I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers." (Acts 22:3)

He says of himself, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." (Galatians 1:14)

Saul was not boasting about his scholastic achievements; he was simply stating facts about himself that provide an insight into what he was like before his conversion to Jesus. He further expounds upon this in his letter to the church at Philippi.

To the Jew, pedigree and the observance of religious rules and regulations were all important, and Saul was pleased to put his pedigree and performance on parade:

"If anyone thinks to base his claims on externals, I could make a stronger case for myself: circumcised on the eighth day, Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred: in my attitude to the law, a Pharisee; in pious zeal, a persecutor of the church; in legalistic rectitude, faultless." (Philippians 3:4-6 NEB)

He was confident that his lineage back to Abraham, the father of the nation, and his meticulous observance of the law were sufficient to secure him his place in heaven. This was his passport to heaven.

Righteousness

(Part Three)

Through the ages, man has made the mistake of thinking that he can make himself right with God and Herculean efforts have been undertaken to achieve this. The "you can save yourself" religion flourished in the days of Jesus, with the Pharisees developing this to a fine art. Jesus often spoke out against this belief.

In his parable about the Pharisee and the publican, he had a particular audience in mind: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable." (Luke 18:9)

Saul was in this category - confident of his own righteousness.

He was convinced that observing his religious duties produced a standard of righteousness acceptable to God. And he was not alone in this way of thinking; his view was shared by many of his fellow Jews.

After his conversion, he laments for them, knowing that they are following a belief system he once embraced: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own [righteousness] they did not submit to God's righteousness." (Romans 10:1-3)

Flawed Righteousness

A Flawed Righteousness

How could such good people, such zealous people for God, such believers in God not be right with God?

These people, like Saul himself, were not lost because they made no effort to keep the law of God; they made a supreme effort. In fact, they were very enthusiastic in their endeavours. Since that was the case, *wherein lay the flaw?*

Our Lord provides an insightful instruction on this subject. (And one could be forgiven for thinking that Jesus is teaching legalism here when in fact he is teaching grace.)

He says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

Is Jesus saying that we need to out-perform the Pharisees?

If they fast twice a week, do we need to fast three times?

And if they donate 10% of their income, do we need to donate 11% or more?

Is that what Jesus is teaching? Most certainly not.

Jesus has always been seeking people who serve from the heart, people who live for God out of sheer love and gratitude for his extension of grace to them.

These people are obedient to the laws of God because God has "put [his] laws in their minds and written it on their hearts." (Jeremiah 31:33)

Furthermore, these are the people to whom God has given a heart transplant. He says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Obedience springs from a new heart given by God, a new Spirit given by God, a new desire to be obedient given by God, accompanied by the gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore the life of obedience is not an attempt to earn credit that can be exchanged for a place in heaven. Obedience that comes from the heart is the outgrowth of a relationship that already exists with God.

After his conversion, Paul wrote of the utter futility of trusting in pedigree and religious performance, even though they once were of great importance to him.

That which was once **"very important"** he now considered as **"garbage"**, not because these things were immoral or evil in themselves, but because they could not do the one thing Paul trusted them to do – save him from his sins and secure his place in heaven.

He says, **"I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ, and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith."** (Philippians 3:7-9 NLT)



(Part Four)

As far back as Job, men have been asking, **"How can a mortal man be righteous before God?"** (Job 9:2)

The Jews of Paul's day (including himself before his conversion) pondered the same question and produced their own solution: **"Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God [they] sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes."** (Romans 10:3-4)

How did they set about establishing their own righteousness?

By trusting in what they were doing, even the good things God told them to do. The focus of their faith was not on God, but on what they did, on what God told them to do.

Trusting what they did could not produce righteousness acceptable to God. When Paul says that God saves us, he moves quickly on to say that it is **"not because of anything we have done"**.

In other words, salvation is not given in exchange for obedience. (2 Timothy 1:9)

Even good deeds that are noble and honourable do not possess what is necessary to save us. It is God who saves us, "not because of righteous things we have done." (Titus 3:5)

The tenor of scripture is clear: man cannot make himself righteous before God no matter how hard he tries. And so much of what Paul wrote on this subject reflects his former religious beliefs and practices. If man is to be saved, then God is going to have to save him.

Imputed Righteousness

An Imputed Righteousness

There is only one way to answer Job's question, "How can a mortal man be righteous before God?"

God must impute righteousness to him. After writing three chapters about the sinfulness of man and his inability to alter his situation, Paul introduces the theme of grace: "But now," he says, "a righteousness from God apart from the law has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Christ Jesus to all who believe." (Romans 3:20-21)

Throughout his life Paul had tried to produce an acceptable righteousness, but failed. Now, however, he understands that there is a righteousness that comes from God himself and it is not obtained by flawless performance, but by faith.

This was not a doctrine developed by Paul; it was a doctrine enshrined in the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, David - Israel's great king - "speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." (Romans 4:6)

There are three things that need to be said here:

1. Righteousness comes from God.
2. Righteousness is credited, or imputed, to the believer.
3. Righteousness is independent of works; that is, it is not a reward for having done something, neither is it imputed because God is obligated to us in some way.

The point is further amplified when Paul says, "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus."

He is saying that the relationship we have with God is attributed entirely to Jesus. He goes on to say that Jesus "has become to us... our righteousness." (1 Corinthians 1:30)

And in one of the most amazing verses in the Bible Paul says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The doctrine of substitution is clear – the sinless Jesus took upon himself our sins, so that "in him" we could be accounted righteous before God. Sinful people are granted the very righteousness of God himself.



(Part Five)

When Paul wrote on the theme of God's amazing grace, he drew on his own life as a self righteous, legalistic sinner. He had believed he would be saved by his works, thereby setting his life on a collision course with God.

However, once grace entered the equation, everything changed and he repeatedly exposed the futility of such thinking. **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

It is clear: we are saved not by our works, but by our faith, which comes to us by hearing the word of God. **(Romans 10:17)** Our response to Christ is faith, trust, belief. Faith and works are opposite, but faith and obedience are compatible.



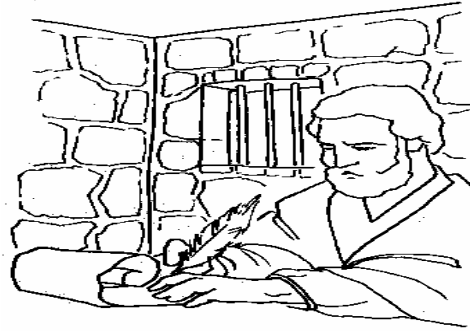
Arise and Be Baptised

Paul spoke of his conversion to Jesus as **"justification by faith."** He had lived his life trying to justify himself, but to no avail. He needed to be forgiven by the one whom he had offended. Forgiveness was freely offered to him in Christ Jesus.

Finally convicted of his sinfulness, and now believing that forgiveness is in the crucified Christ, he was told, **"Arise, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name."** (Acts 22:16)

In baptism, Paul called upon the Lord Jesus Christ to save. In baptism, he was identified, by his faith, with the saving event that secured the remission of his sins – the atoning death of the Lamb of God. In baptism Paul did not **"do"** something to be saved; it was a declaration that he believed in what Jesus' death accomplished for him.

In baptism his faith was not in what he was doing; but in Jesus whose death secured remission of his sins.



An Example to All

The conversion of Paul demonstrates that no one is beyond the reach of God's love, mercy and grace. No one is so entrenched in their views that God is no longer able to reach them.

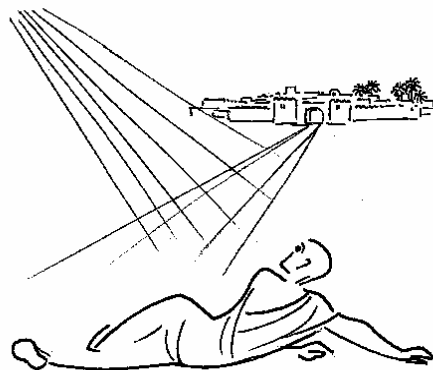
We know people we do not regard as likely candidates to become disciples of Jesus. They are prejudiced, indifferent, entrenched and intolerant. But so was Paul. He was fanatical in his unbelief about Jesus.

Yet God saved him and his conversion to the Lord is an example to help encourage us never to give up sharing the gospel, even with those we regard as the most unlikely people to believe.

Paul says, "**But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.**" (1 Timothy 1:16)

We don't always know what God is doing in the life of a person. The persecuted church would not have believed God was working in Paul's life, drawing him to trust in Jesus. But he was.

On the road to Damascus Jesus confronted Paul, saying, "**It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**" (Acts 26:14)



"Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9.5)

Paul's resistance could not be maintained indefinitely. God was "**goading**" him, prodding, nudging him in the direction of Jesus. The truth of the gospel was drawing him and he would soon have to confess that Jesus is Lord. And he did.

Paul the legalist, the self-righteous Pharisee, the closed-minded persecutor of the church, converted to Jesus and became the greatest servant the church has ever had. There is hope for all.