



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## You Want Who To Do What?

Acts 22.3–21; et. al.

David Anguish

### Introduction

A former ministry colleague used to tell about a man who regularly attended the church where he was preaching at the time, but who made sure everyone knew he didn't want to be there. It wasn't just his body language, facial expressions, etc.; he would do things like attach the citrus fruit stickers they used on their lapels to identify members and guests to his eyelids and try to distract children and others who sat nearby.

One Sunday morning, his actions became even more noticeable. He made a poster with letters large enough to be easily read from the pulpit and proceeded to hold it up where my friend (and everyone else) could see it at key points in the sermon. This time, everyone noticed and that was what they all wanted to talk about as they exited after the final prayer. Several pointedly asked my friend if he was going to confiscate the poster.

Yes, there is more to the story and later I'll finish it. First, you need to hear some things about the subject of the sermon my friend preached one Sunday the man attended.

### The Day Jesus Got Saul's Attention

Multiple times in Acts and elsewhere, we find references to and details about Saul's dramatic conversion. One is Luke's third-person report (Acts 9.1–19). Two others are reported as part of presentations by Paul that Luke records (Acts 22.3–21; 26.4–18). And at various places in his letters, Paul alludes to that incredible day (e.g., Gal 1.11–17; Phil 3.3–6; 1 Tim 1.12–17).

As we review and highlight key ideas in the accounts, we should give more than passing attention to Saul's behaviors prior to his experience on the Damascus road. Because we are familiar with the apostle he became, we can gloss over the man of faith he was before he committed to follow Jesus. And yes, he *was* a man of faith even then. Think about it: he received the best rabbinical education and was a member of the strictest, most zealous sect of Judaism (Acts 22.3; 26.5; cf. Phil 3.5; Gal 1.14). It was his zealous faith that explains what Paul calls the "raging fury" (Acts 26.11) with which he pursued Christians all the way to Damascus, 135 miles

(6 days) from Jerusalem. Rejecting the more reasoned approach of Gamaliel and others (cf. Acts 5.34–39), he began a campaign of intense persecution that was at times deadly (Acts 9.1–2, 13–14; 22.4–5; 26.10–11; Gal 1.13; 1 Tim 1.13). The same texts that tell us about that campaign also show that he acted in sincerity and with zeal for his faith (cf. Acts 26.9, 11; cf. 22.3; 23.1; Gal 1.14; Phil 3.6; 1 Tim 1.13).

How could he be both a persecutor sanctioning the state murder of fellow Jews for allegiance to the Christian sect (cf. Acts 24.5, 14; 28.22) and a man of zeal with a clear conscience? The answer is found in Stephen's sermon and Saul's reaction to it (Acts 7.1–53; 8.1). Stephen was clear that since the new had come, the old had to go. And Saul just as clearly understood that for the old to stay, the new must go (Bruce 1977, 70). Stephen spoke of a *crucified* Messiah; to Saul, that was absurd! Stephen said the temple was now *unnecessary*; to Saul, that was heresy! Yet, despite the absurdity and the heresy, Jesus's disciples were multiplying. They had to be stopped—and stopped now! So, following the more hardline approach favored by some Sadducean rulers, Saul attained the necessary papers and went after the disciples in Damascus.<sup>1</sup>

Most Bible students are quite familiar with what happened next. As he neared Damascus, Saul was blinded and confronted by the risen Jesus who told him that he, Jesus, was the real object of Saul's persecution (Acts 9.3–6; 22.6–8; 26.13–15). Because he was blind, he required assistance to complete the journey to Damascus where he spent the next three days in fasting and prayer, demonstrating the discipline typical of people who were repenting and seeking God's face (cf. Acts 9.11). Meanwhile, the Lord appeared in a vision to a Damascus disciple named Ananias and told him to go to Saul, restore his sight, tell him God's will for him, and baptize him (Acts 9.10–19; 22.12–16).

### From Saul to Paul: Reexamining the Contrast

Knowing Saul's reputation, Ananias was understandably reluctant. Indeed, think about how much Saul frightened the disciples, and why. Acts 8.3 says, "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and woman and committed them to prison." Acts 9.1 continues the account, reporting that subsequent to the events involving Philip the evangelist (Acts 8.4–40), Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Acts 22.4–5 presents his own description of his furious crusade: "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ... and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." In Acts 26.10–11, he said that "when [many of the saints] were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." And lest someone claim that Luke put the words in the latter two passages on Paul's lips, notice that his letter to the Galatians confirms them: "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1.13).

No wonder Ananias resisted: "Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name'" (Acts 9.13–14).

The change in Saul was so drastic that, when he began to preach Jesus after his baptism, synagogue audiences were astounded: "And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' And all who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is

not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" (Acts 9.20–21). When he returned to Jerusalem after preaching for a time in Damascus the disciples there were suspicious that he was engaged in a long con to entrap them; it took Barnabas to convince them otherwise:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9.26–27).

But even more surprising than the fact that he was preaching Jesus was the commission he was given. The zealous Jew who was so diligent in his efforts to protect his people from the one he believed to be a charlatan and the people he and his followers had duped had been tasked to not only proclaim and defend Jesus, but to be his ambassador to the Gentiles! Read the testimony of these passages against the backdrop of Saul's persecution activities, as if you are hearing them for the first time:

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9.15).

And he said, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22.14–15).

"But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26.16–18).

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone (Gal 1.15–16).

Now, for a moment, forget the history you know and try to transport yourself back to the time before Saul fulfilled his commission as Paul: who among us would have chosen Saul to preach Christ, let alone to preach Christ to the Gentiles? Who would have believed God would choose him to do that? If we are amazed, we are not alone; Paul himself said later that he was amazed by the events. He never forgot what he had done, or the implications of it. Thus, he never forgot that he was a sinner saved by the grace and mercy of God (1 Tim 1.12–16). Is it any wonder he would pause his letter to effusively praise God? "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim 1.17).

## Lessons for Spiritual Health

First, Saul reminds us that conversion begins with surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Ajith Fernando cites Roy Clements (*The Church That Turned*) who makes the important observation that, as Paul calls later for radical discipleship, he does not "use the phrases 'decided for Christ' or 'committed to Christ,' though decision and commitment are certainly involved.... Conversion is at root not a decision, nor a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme

---

authority of Christ” (Fernando 1998, 303). In fact, the idea of conversion as a decisive turn is found in numerous passages throughout Acts and elsewhere (Acts 3.19; 9.35; 11.21; 14.15; 15.19; 26.18, 20; 28.27; cf. 1 Thess 1.9).

Second, as important as the preceding idea is, it must always be considered in light of this one: for the person who is willing to surrender, transformation is always possible. The persecutor who became the apostle is *prima facie* evidence for this:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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. 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 (1 Tim 1.12–16).

So, third, we must remember that, even now, when people submit to Jesus as Lord, God can transform them, regardless of their history or how unlikely such a change might be to us. As I write that sentence, I think of a man I knew who was incarcerated in Georgia’s maximum-security prison which was then located near the town of Reidsville. The crimes for which he was imprisoned destroyed his home. But he came to know Jesus, was redeemed, established a new home where he was a faithful father to two children who grew up to be faithful disciples in their own right; both were employed for a number of years in service professions. That man’s life and influence serve as a reminder that the kind of transformation Saul experienced has been repeated many times over the succeeding centuries.

## Conclusion

But what about the man with the distracting poster? In addition to what I told you earlier, you should know that the attachment of the stickers to his eyelids and holding up the poster he had made occurred on two different Sundays. During the song of invitation on another Sunday between those two events, the man went to the front with tears streaming down his cheeks. He would confess Christ, and my friend would immerse him. But before he would allow himself to be immersed, he had to have the answer to a question: “You have no idea what I have done, how messed up my life has been. Are you saying that someone like me can be forgiven!?”

What prompted him to ask that was Paul’s statement in 1 Timothy 1.15, the main idea in my friend’s sermon that Sunday: “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.”

And that poster he held up? He did that on a Sunday not long *after* his baptism. He could think of no other way to express his joy and gratitude over getting to worship as a forgiven man than to make a poster expressing his gratitude and praise. And when, sometime later, my friend left that church to begin his ministry in the church where I came to know and work with him, that man, once so bitter and angry about having to be in the assembly, was the first to arrive, greeting everyone else who came, and the last to leave.

Oh, my friend took the sign from him—in fact, the man offered it to him. But I heard him say more than once that he had reservations about doing so. His fear was that the man would one day become like so many for whom Christian worship and faith had become routine, joyless,

---

and dead. May you and I always remember who we've really been so that we can rejoice in who we now are!

### Works Cited

- F. F. Bruce. 1977. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*. Third Revised and Enlarged Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Ajith Fernando. 1998. *Acts*. The NIV Application Commentary. ed. Terry Muck. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1 §§ 197–199, who says that the Sadducees were “very rigid in judging offenders.” Fernando 1998, 295, notes this reference to support his observation that the Sadducees were “more heartless in their judgments than the Pharisees, and it may not have been natural for a loyal Pharisee like Paul to go and request letters from the Sadducean high priest (v. 2). This is an indication of the extremes he was willing to go [sic] in attempting to stamp out this menace.”

Some have contended that Luke has exaggerated the legal latitude given to the Sanhedrin here. But F. F. Bruce showed that when the Jewish state won independence under the Hasmoneans, “the Romans required the surrounding nations to grant Judea the rights and privileges of a sovereign state, including the right of extradition.” This is documented in 1 Maccabees 15.21 which notes “that a letter delivered by a Roman ambassador to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt in 138 B.C. concludes with the demand, ‘If any pestilent men have fled to you from their country [Judea], hand them over to Simon the high priest, that he may punish them according to their law.’” Julius Caesar confirmed those rights in 47 B.C., even though the Jewish people no longer constituted a sovereign nation (Bruce 1990, 233).