

## SAUL TO PAUL – GOD’S REDEEMING WORK

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**Scripture:** Acts 9, Galatians 1

I want you to consider this overzealous man, filled with hate and anger and rage, known for persecuting Christians. He violently dragged them out of their homes, tearing families apart, throwing men and women in prison. He stood by as people laid their garments at his feet, while they stoned Stephen, while he gave his approval.

And he breathed threats and murder against believers, tried to punish them in the synagogues, and sought to force them to blaspheme and deny their allegiance to Jesus. This was the man they called Saul. With the full authority of the chief priests, he cast his vote for Christians to be put to death. His zeal driving him far and wide in violent hatred, making him one of the church’s most feared persecutors.

And then he met Jesus on the Damascus Road. The light of heaven blinded his eyes, and the voice of the risen Lord pierced his heart. *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* And in that moment, the persecutor became the pursued, and the hunter became the captive of God’s grace. The man who had once dragged believers into prisons now planted churches across the Roman Empire. The one who breathed threats and murder now breathed out prayers and encouragement for the saints. The man who approved of Stephen’s death now himself faced stoning, beating, shipwrecks, and imprisonment for the name of Jesus. The one who tried to force Christians to blaspheme now boldly confessed before kings and governors the name of Jesus. And the one who once cast his vote for Christians to die, could say with confidence at the end of his life, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith.”*

Saul, the persecutor, had become Paul, the apostle; the living proof that no one is beyond the reach of God’s redemptive, transforming grace. No one. Paul’s preparation for ministry began on that Damascus Road. There he met Jesus, face to face. We read in Acts 9:1-6 that Paul was stopped in his tracks by Christ Himself, and his proud independence was broken. Every ministry begins with a personal encounter with Jesus. You cannot serve Him until you have met Him. Like Moses before the burning bush, Paul had to first meet God personally before being sent.

Then after that, came the days of blindness. Acts 9:9 tells us that for three days he sat in darkness, neither eating nor drinking. God was slowly stripping away, refining, redefining who Paul was. Oftentimes, God uses the seasons of silence and weakness to prepare us for His work.

Jacob was left limping after wrestling with God. Paul’s brokenness would become the place where God reshaped him.

Then the touch of Ananias. Acts 9: 10-19 tells us how Ananias laid hands on Saul. His sight was restored. He received the Holy Spirit and he was baptized.

And Paul was not launched alone. Paul was launched by the body of Christ, who welcomed him as well. Ministry requires both God’s call and the church’s confirmation. Always the objective and the subjective. Always the within and the without. Even the greatest leaders need a Barnabas or an Ananias to affirm them, affirm God’s call on their lives. And immediately after, Paul began preaching in Damascus. Ch. 9:20-22 records that he at once proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. And his boldness amazed everyone.

But opposition quickly followed. Passion is good but it will always, always be tested. And we must expect opposition when we step out in faith.

And after this, came a hidden season. Galatians 1: 15-17 tells us that Paul went away into Arabia. A time of solitude and preparation. It's likely where he wrestled with scripture and gained deeper revelation of Christ. God often takes us into the desert seasons to shape us before using us. Just as David was prepared in the wilderness before becoming king, Paul was prepared in obscurity before becoming an apostle.

And three years later, he visits Jerusalem. Both in Acts and in Galatians, it tells us that the church feared him. But again, Barnabas was the one who watched for him. He met Peter, James, spoke boldly and again faced threats. Even when misunderstood, beloved, we must remain faithful. Because God raises encouragers like Barnabas to open doors. From there, he was sent away to Tarsus for safety. Acts 9:30, Galatians 1:21 show that Paul spent years in relative obscurity, sharpening his skills and waiting on God's timing.

This is a kind of walkthrough through Paul's life. With so many points for us to kind of hook on to, and say: I wonder whether this is important in my life, I wonder whether this is something that I've overlooked in my life. I wonder whether this is something that I balked at and not allowed God to do in my life, where I've struggled with Him in times of silence, in times of waiting, in times of wilderness experiences.

Finally, Paul's ministry was launched in Antioch. Acts 11:25-26 tells us that Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul and brought him to Antioch. For a whole year, they taught great numbers of people. And the disciples were first called Christians there in Antioch.

God's timing is always perfect. When we are ready, He will call us out and place us in ministry. Paul's journey shows us that ministry is not instant but a process. Encounter with Christ, waiting in weakness, confirmation by the church, preparation in obscurity. And then, ascending forth in God's time. There are many times in our lives when God repeats this process. It's not a 'once done' kind of thing. God will bring us away from points of ministry also to redo some things, to show us things He wants us to see, to teach us things He wants us to learn, to prepare us for things that are ahead. And wilderness and desert experiences, times of silence are times when God is teaching us lessons – shaping us and molding us for seasons that are ahead.

#### **Saul's characteristics before he met Jesus.**

- Zealous, but misguided. He writes in Philippians 3:6 as to zeal and a persecutor of the church. His zeal was fanatical, driving him to destroy what God was actually building.
- Violent and merciless. Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.
- Anger and aggression – tore families apart and brought fear to believers.
- Proud and self-righteous. As to righteousness under the law, blameless. He trusted in his own works and pedigree. Blind to his need for grace.
- Legalistic and rigid. "Extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers," he would write in Galatians 1:4. His devotion to the law became a weapon against those who followed Christ.
- Deceptively religious. Saul thought he was serving God, but in reality, he was fighting against Him.

But look at the way God took those same characteristics and redeemed them.

- His zeal became redirected. The same zeal with which he persecuted the church became a burning passion to preach Christ. “Woe unto me,” he said, “if I do not preach the gospel.” His boldness was transformed.
- His fearless aggression turned into fearless preaching, even in the face of beatings and prison. “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he wrote in Romans 1:16.
- Pride gave way for humility. Pride gave way to dependence on the grace of God. “By the grace of God, I am what I am,” he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15.
- Law turned to grace. His deep knowledge of the law equipped him to explain Christ as the fulfillment of the law. Romans, Galatians all flow from this redeemed perspective.
- Religion turned to relationship. The man who once tried to climb to God through works became the champion of justification by faith. “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law,” he wrote in Romans 3:28.

So, the very traits that once worked against God were not erased, but redeemed. Saul’s zeal, his boldness, his intellect and drive were repurposed in Paul’s life for the spread of the gospel. What had been destructive in his own hands became powerful when surrendered to Christ. It’s amazing how God is able to redeem the very things that we have once used against Him for evil, and turn them into instruments for good and righteousness.

When I do pre-marital counselling, I often remind couples that every God-given strength has the potential to drift into the flesh when the flesh is in charge, and become something that God is not in. Love, for example, is from God. But when taken to an extreme, it becomes lust. Courage is strength, but when it is twisted, it becomes recklessness. Discernment is a gift, but when pushed too far, it becomes judgmental. And ambition can be holy, but when warped by pride, it becomes selfish ambition. Even passion for truth, when divorced from grace, turns into harshness.

And this is exactly what happened with Paul. His zeal, his drive, passion for God’s law, when left in the hands of the flesh, became destructive. But once surrendered to Christ, those same qualities were redeemed and became powerful tools for the kingdom of God.

Maybe today, you’ve walked into this sanctuary wanting to spend time with God. And yet, in the back of your mind, you’ve been burdened with things that are pulling you down, pulling you away from the Lord, or even preventing you from being what and who God wants you to be. And you’ve tried to overcome them in your own strength, but you’ve never been able to.

Perhaps the list in Galatians 5 feels close to home. Maybe you’re struggling with anger, or bitterness, or rage, or envy. Or maybe it’s impurity, or sensuality, or disputes, or even drunkenness. And these things can creep in and almost redefine who we are. Maybe, you came in here hoping for a touch from the Master, to deal with those very things that seem to suck out the very energy, and love and grace that you want to have and enjoy in your life.

Beloved, every visit into God’s presence is an opportunity for Him to touch you, to heal you, to take away the things that weigh you down. And maybe today is that day for you. Maybe today is the day when you can have an engagement with Jesus like Paul had on the Damascus Road, a moment where everything changes, where that thing changes and is redeemed by God.

Because what Jesus did for Paul, He can and will do for you. He took Paul’s zeal, his boldness, his intellect, his drive, all the things that once worked against God. And He redeemed them, turned them around, and made them work for good just as the Bible promises for those who love the Lord.

So, I want to encourage you this morning. I want to press this into your heart. You don't have to let that sinking feeling stay. You can turn it over to the Lord right here and now. Say to Him, "Lord, would You touch me? Would You take these things that have gone astray, my anger, my envy, my bitterness? And would You bring them under the canopy of Your love, Your grace, Your strength, and Your compassion? Would You pull me back from the edge? Would You redeem what I have misused? Would You redefine me by Your Spirit so that, like Paul, my life would be transformed and used for Your glory?"

And you know, beloved, God doesn't just redeem us and then leave us there. He redeems us for a purpose. Once He redeems us, then He begins to fill us, and we become aware of the reason why He has placed us here. Each of us has a plan and a purpose that God has placed within us, a reason why we are here on this earth. In His wisdom, God has said, "I want you to walk this earth with this temperament, with these personality traits, with this training, with this knowledge, with this wisdom, with these opportunities at this time, at this place, so that you may be My hands and My feet, My words, My lips to the people all around you." That's His will for you. That's the role that He has given to you, to each one of us. And we are responsible for that role and that purpose.

And when we make that decision to let God take what was once under the flesh and bring it under the Spirit, wonderful things begin to happen. Godly things begin to happen. Just look at Paul. He who once opposed Christ went on to write so prolifically, travelled so extensively, too the word of God to so many places, wrote so many books in the Bible. Through him, God gave us not only history, but also explanation. He was the one who actually fleshed out the gospel narratives in all his writings. He took the 'what happened' and made us understand the so what of God, what God had done. Paul's writings are filled with verses that have encouraged, inspired, calmed, and rekindled faith in countless believers.

I have a handout for you if you want. I just culled together about 15-18 verses that I thought were wonderful verses for us to put up and be encouraged by. It's there as a hard copy or as a QR code that you can scan and get it digitally onto your device. These words are beautiful. God's word that is so redeeming.

Of the many verses that Paul has given us, I want to use just five of them to bring our time to a close.

- Romans 1:16 *For I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*  
Paul knew the gospel was not a weak message, but the very power of God. He had seen it change his own life, and he had watched it transform Jew and Gentile alike. And for us too, this verse reminds us never to shrink back, for the gospel we carry is the hope for the world.
- Philippians 4:13 *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* Paul wrote this while in prison; not in comfort, but in chains. His confidence wasn't in his own strength, but in the enabling power of Christ within him.  
And whatever circumstances you're facing, the same strength is available for you and me, beloved, this morning.
- 2 Corinthians 12:9 *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* Paul had prayed for this thorn in his flesh to be removed, but God gave him something better. Sustaining grace. Weakness became the very place where God's strength shone the brightest. And that same grace is enough for every struggle that you may be facing today.
- 2 Timothy 4:7 *I fought the good fight. I finished the race. I kept the faith.*

Near the end of his life, Paul could look back and see that, though beaten and imprisoned, though misunderstood and opposed, he had stayed faithful through it all. His legacy was not in ease, but in endurance. May this be the testimony of our lives as well.

- Philippians 2:3 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*

Paul knew that true greatness in the kingdom of God comes through humility. Pride divides, but humility builds unity and love. And when we live this way, we reflect the very character of Christ to the world.

So beloved, these five verses give us a framework for life. they remind us of the power of the gospel, the strength of Christ, the sufficiency of grace, the call to perseverance and the beauty of humility. If we hold on to these truths and live them out like Paul, we will discover that God can take our lives with all its strengths and weaknesses and use it for His glory.

I want to just speak these words over you this morning, beloved. Do not be ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to you who believe. And because of this, you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

And when you feel weak, remember the Lord's word: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." So, run your race with endurance that one day you too may say: I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

And as you go, beloved, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. But, in humility, count others more significant than yourselves. May His word sink into your heart, your mind, and your very life as seed sinking into fertile soil, nourished by the spirit of God Himself to bring forth much fruit.

Heavenly Father, how good it has been to turn the spotlight on one of Your children who lived such a wonderful life in the power of the resurrected Christ. Obedient to Your leading and to Your spirit, suffered so much for the sake of the gospel. And was able to, at the end of his life, say that he had lived it well and kept the faith.

Lord, that is our prayer for ourselves as well, that You would help us, Lord, to allow those things that are under the flesh this morning to come under the power of Your Spirit. So that they can be redeemed for godly work in the days and months that are ahead.

And I pray for anyone here, Lord, who is struggling with some area of the flesh, Lord, that has brought them down, belittled them, never seemed to allow them to experience the joy of their salvation. I pray, Lord, that as they turn that area over to You and allow the Spirit to shine in that area, that they would experience Your grace and Your love in such beautiful, wonderful measures, Lord. That the radiance of this thing that is happening in their lives, Lord, would just go through the day and the weeks and the months that are ahead, encouraging and inspiring them.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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