

Acts

Acts 9:1-31 - Saul and the power of God's grace

In **Acts 9:1** we're back to the rampaging fury being unleashed against the church by **Saul**. In the NIV it says he was "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples," but in the Greek it says he was "breathing IN murderous threats."

Today we'd call Saul a 'psychopath' - a man who lived and breathed violent thoughts, who happily condoned and approved having Stephen thrown off a building and stoned (Acts 7:58, 8:1). Saul was a nasty piece of work, a toxic man to be around, a bully who loved humiliating people, and by his own admission too, as we see in **1 Timothy 1:13**, where he describes himself in his past life as a "blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man."

And again, out of his own mouth, he admits he had no control over his murderous thoughts, because, as he explains to King Agrippa in **Acts 26:9-11**, "I was **convinced that I ought to do** all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth....I put many of the Lord's people 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. I was **so obsessed with persecuting them** that I even hunted them down in foreign cities" (The Message).

Notice how he was "obsessed"? In other words, he couldn't stop wanting to hunt people down. He was like a big game hunter obsessed with killing just to have trophies on his wall. But this was the air Saul breathed, the lifestyle he flourished in. So we're given a vivid portrait of Saul, as the kind of loathsome man you hope 'burns in hell' some day. But somehow this "worst of sinners," as he described himself, became the apostle Paul and the one Jesus chose to pioneer **the third stage** of his ministry in Acts 1:8, when the gospel would expand beyond Judea and Samaria "to the ends of the earth."

So how did this amazing transformation happen, and why to such a man as Saul? Well, let's get to the "how" first: It started that fateful day in **Acts 9:1-2**, when Saul "went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to **Damascus**," so that "anyone he found belonging to 'the Way'....he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem." Saul was "obsessed" all right, because Damascus was over 200 kms away, a two week trip on foot.

But just as he was nearing the Syrian capital, **verse 3**, Saul was “suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: ‘Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?’” - a good question for any bully: “Why are you picking on me like this? What do you hope to accomplish?”

But the question bounces right off Saul, which isn’t surprising, because a psychopath has no idea why he’s acting the way he does. Instead Saul wants to know who “ME” is. Did he have a suspicion who it might be, though, as if he knew this day was coming, because he asks: “Who are you, LORD?” Or, being a Jew, who knew angels had often confronted people, was this just a natural response to an obviously supernatural voice?

Either way, it works in getting his attention, especially when “me” turns out to be Jesus in **verse 5**, and Jesus tells him “to get up and go into the city” where he’ll “be told what he must do.” Saul the psychopath is now suddenly meek and compliant, because he obeys, no questions asked.

So Jesus knew exactly how to get through to Saul, no matter how poisoned his mind was, or how unstable, or how much he hated these people who “belonged to The Way,” which is encouraging, because if Jesus can get through to a man like Saul, what’s to stop him getting through to anybody?

But what’s also noticeable here in **verse 2** is how Saul viewed and identified the people of this rogue religion he wanted to eradicate. They “belonged to **THE WAY**,” which seems like an odd term, but seen through the eyes of a man like Saul, a super strict Pharisee who lived and breathed **one way** himself, here were people who were just like him, who lived and breathed “a way” too, and they were just as driven by it as he was driven by his way.

It helps explain why Jesus allowed Saul to pick on the church in his early years, because it opened Saul’s eyes to this **OTHER way** being lived by people who were just as strong in their beliefs as he was in his. But their way was also very **different** to everything HE’D lived by and believed was “the only way.” And it really disturbed him, that such a way existed - that could also fill people with zeal and dedication, and it was spreading rapidly too.

It was also wonderful evidence of the Holy Spirit at work, because Jesus said the Holy Spirit would make his disciples into a visible witness - and here we find out how: It was in the church’s **very different WAY of life**, that in attitude and lifestyle were totally different to the ways of the prevailing culture. Jesus’ disciples breathed in different air, and certainly not the air being pumped out by legalistic religion that created people like Saul.

So that's the story of HOW this amazing transformation happened to Saul, but we still have the second question from page 1 to answer, as to WHY it happened to such a man as Saul.

Well, again, from his own mouth, Saul answers that question for us: "I was shown mercy," he writes in **1 Timothy 1:13**, "because I acted in **ignorance and unbelief**." He had no idea he was an obsessive, murder-loving psychopath, and he wouldn't have believed it if someone told him. He would have remained in the grip of his ignorance and unbelief, therefore, had it not been for "The grace of our Lord being poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus," **verse 14**.

And there we have the heart and soul of Jesus' ministry, because if it wasn't for God's grace, in both its forms, as an expression of God's kindness (verse 13) and its power to rescue us from ourselves, we'd all be stuck in ignorance and unbelief. But fortunately for us, **verse 15**, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save even the worst of sinners." Which explains why Jesus chose Saul, because Saul by his own definition in **verse 16** was the "**worst of sinners**." And he was too, because his psychopathic, murder-loving obsession was totally directed at destroying Christianity **like no other person alive**.

But why would Jesus allow Saul to be that way for a while, even allowing him to imprison and kill hundreds, if not thousands, of Christians? Saul answers that in **verse 16**: "The reason I was shown such mercy was this: **so that in me**, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his **unlimited patience** as an **example** for those who (as The Message phrases it) are right on the edge of trusting him forever."

If anyone needs a convincing reason for trusting God, in other words, read the story of Saul. Nothing, not even a loathsome man like Saul, stands in the way of Jesus' "unlimited patience." There is no wall in human behaviour that blocks out his grace and mercy being "poured out in abundance," **verse 14**.

And don't miss "the **faith and love** that are in Christ Jesus" too (same verse), which come in two ways: the faith and love Jesus has in himself that he gives to us, and the faith and love Jesus has in and for his Father's plan, that enables even monsters like Saul to be rescued and restored.

But it needed such a man as Saul as visible proof and witness to the power of grace - grace that could tolerate and then transform a man with murderous intent toward God's people into loving them and being willing to take whatever suffering came his way on their behalf (Acts 9:16).

Meanwhile, back in **Acts 9:8-12**, Saul's suffering had already begun, because his confrontation with Jesus had left him blind and helpless for three days, until "a disciple named Ananias" in Damascus is told in a vision to go to Saul, who's also had a vision about Ananias coming to lay hands on him and restore his sight. Ananias doesn't like the idea at all, however, having heard of Saul's rampage against "the saints in Jerusalem" and his mission to arrest them in Damascus too (verses 13-14).

"Just do it," Ananias is told, because, **verse 15**, "Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel." So Ananias, as just a regular disciple, lays his hands on Saul, so that Saul "may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit," **verse 17**, after which Saul "spent several days with the disciples in Damascus, preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God," **verses 19-20**.

Talk about a **resurrection to new life**, and what a witness to what Jesus was alive as the "Son of God" for. Because Jesus had just created a new life for an impossibly poisonous, psychopathic obsessive like Saul. No wonder "all those who heard Saul preach were astonished," **verse 21**, and even more so in **verse 22** as "Saul grew more and more powerful, baffling the Jews in Damascus in his proof that Jesus really is the Christ," the promised Messiah who would rescue us helpless humans from the corruptive ways of evil. And what better proof of exactly that, than the amazing transformation of Saul himself?

But look what happens next. In **verse 23**, "the Jews (in Damascus) conspired to kill Saul." So did the "Grecian Jews" when Saul went to Jerusalem in **verse 29**, because he was "speaking boldly in the name of the Lord," **verse 28**. But imagine what would happen today too, if you stood up and boldly said, "Of course God's going to save everyone; look at what happened to Saul."

And you'd have the right to say it too, because Saul was meant to be an "example of Jesus' unlimited patience," where no human behaviour - not even the worst of sinners - could block the flow of Jesus' abundant grace, which is utterly crucial for those looking into Christianity and teetering on the edge of whether to believe it or not (1 Timothy 1:16).

But expect strong resistance. Attempts on Saul's life were made in both Damascus (Acts 9:24-25) and Jerusalem (verse 29). So even when faced with the astounding power of God's grace that could transform a man like Saul, people back then resisted it, just as many professing Christians resist it today, which makes you wonder if they've ever had God's grace explained to them properly.