

Philip, the Evangelist, has just led the Ethiopian Eunuch to Saving Faith; as soon as they came up out of the water of baptism, Philip was Raptured/Harpazo'd up and away by the Holy Spirit and deposited 30 miles away; we can safely assume that God used His newly born again child, likely His first in Ethiopia, to begin spreading the Gospel throughout Ethiopia and on to all of Africa.

But what of the violent hater of Christians, Saul, who was last seen watching over the coats of those who had murdered Stephen...

Acts 9:1: *'And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,*

We first met Saul in Acts 7:58: *'...And cast him (Stephen) out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.'* Then, in 8:1:

'...And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.... As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and hauling men and women committed them to prison. ⁴ Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.'

Later, in Acts 22:3, we'll see Paul looking back upon this time of which we're now reading; he'll later write:

'I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God... ⁴ And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. ⁵ As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.'

Saul was a rising star among the Pharisees, having studied under Gamaliel; he had, perhaps, declared unto Stephen's murderers the supposed legal justifications for the execution of Stephen and then stood proudly by, gloating over his most important part in the removal of this dangerous heretic. His religious zeal to defend the Law of Moses moved Paul to make havoc of the Church, arresting all he found, taking them to prison. But though the disciples were scattered abroad because of Saul's persecutions, rather than destroying the Church, Saul's actions actually grew and strengthened the Church which then acted to push him further into this most unnatural hatred and zeal to stamp out Christianity altogether even though, earlier, his own professor, Gamaliel, had wisely counseled the exact opposite response to the miracles and preaching of the Apostles:

'Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; ³⁵ And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men... Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: ³⁹ But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. ⁴⁰ And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. ⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.' Acts 5:34

We know that Saul likely heard this, Gamaliel's admonition of restraint, but like the proud and arrogant student he likely was, he not only ignored it but chose to respond in the opposite, seeking to kill, murder and destroy. He was so given over to this rage that even his breathing and speaking were filled with threatenings and slaughter.

Verse 2: (Saul 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.'*

Imagine Saul's all-consuming rage which drove him to forego every constructive part of his life in order to travel long, miserable distances riding on donkeys to search out and capture every Christian he could find and to then put up with all the miserable hassle of hauling them all the way back to Jerusalem. I imagine his motivation must have been his lust for the praise and approval of all the higher ranking Pharisees.

What I say next might sound 'different,' but I believe it to be true if we are to believe that God is truly Sovereign and in complete control of all things, in all places and at all times: God is the One moving Saul to act in this manner; God is causing it, first, to grow and strengthen the True Church, to cause the persecution which would cause the scattering and enlarging of the Church just as, today, we see God causing persecution of Jews, Worldwide, in order to finally, now in the End Times, draw them, forcing them to return to Israel. But also, importantly, God was causing this to form in Saul, soon to be Paul, a truly humble, repentant heart which recognizes the unimaginable Grace of God in choosing someone like himself, to love him, to forgive him, to die for him. Soon, instead of trying to destroy the Church, Paul will be used by God, more than any other, to establish the Church's firm foundation of the Word of God.

God is, first, forming the hard, proud, arrogant and murderous heart of Paul which He will then miraculously change, for His Glory, into a heart that is faithful, repentant, humble, soft, loving, patient and full of grace, a heart which seeks after God, which seeks God's Face: a heart that is willing to endure every persecution and hardship for the sake of the Gospel of God's Saving Grace, delivered to him, personally, from the Lord Jesus Christ, The Word of God.

This is what would move Paul, years later, to write: *'According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. ¹² And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; ¹³ Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. ¹⁶ Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, **that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.**'* 1Tim 1:11

Paul is saying that God intended that I would be the clearest example of God's perfect Grace... He took the worst and transformed it into the best; He took the hardest and transformed it into the softest; He took the most impossible and transformed it into a picture that no one and nothing is impossible for God.

God's Grace is exceeding abundant; the Greek word: ὑπερεπλεόνασεν hyperplionazo/hooper-play-on-ad'zo which means that God's Grace to Paul, and to us, is super-hyper-overflowing... Paul is saying that God's Plan was to use someone like him... so totally overcome in evil... to save Paul with absolute overflowing Grace... so as to be the perfect example for us... that God's Grace is super-absolutely-overabundantly overflowing to us! No matter what we have ever done, or will do... God's Grace to us, through the Lord Jesus Christ, absolutely **forgives and ... forgets**. God says: *'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.'* Isaiah 43:25

Why does God do this? does Paul deserve God's forgiveness? so that God will be more attractive? so that it will be easier for people to be saved?

'... for Mine own sake.' God's reason is the same... that He would be glorified.. the Glory of God!

And, Paul then becomes the example held up before anyone to whom we might share the Gospel: nothing they have ever done is beyond God's Grace.

Verse 3: *'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?'*

In a flash! the change happens! This is the most dramatic conversion in all of Scripture. Paul illustrates God's Grand Work of Salvation. At God's exact moment, He shines the Light of His Presence within the heart of each one, one by one, whom He has chosen for His Own. God did not just suddenly choose to give Saul a wakeup call; God had chosen Paul, as His own, from the foundation of the World. He did not, at this moment, just

begin His Work in forming Saul into Paul, who wrote: *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: ⁴ According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ⁵ Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.'* Eph 1:3 Paul Chosen to be holy and without blame! If anyone should be blamed, it would be Saul/Paul but no... *holy and without blame.*

*'But when it pleased God, who **separated me from my mother's womb**, and called me by his grace, ¹⁶ To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen;'* Gal 1:15 Paul

To reveal His Son IN me.

God separated Paul from birth and then formed him to His exact specifications: *'Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. ¹⁹ Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? ²⁰ Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? ²¹ Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? ²² What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:'* Rom 9:18 Paul

God hardened Saul, His chosen, for His Own purposes throughout Saul's life until the moment, in a flash of Light, God opened Saul's spiritual eyes to suddenly 'see' The Light. In fact, God closed Saul's physical eyes, for a time, to further illustrate to him, his spiritual illumination.

*'And we know that **all things** work together for good to them that love God, to them who are **the called according to his purpose.**'* Rom 8:28 Paul

Paul was of **the called** according to God's Grand Purpose; all things in Paul's life included all things; not just the things after his conversion... all things which seemed good and all things which seemed bad... all things!

But never forget: God is always in absolute control over all people, all places, all happenings; God is Sovereign!

'... for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: ... yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.' Isa 46:9

'The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand:' Isa 14:24

'The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will... There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD.' Prov 21: 1.30

'I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: ⁶ That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else. ⁷ I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.' Isa 45:5

God says all of this to all of us! I chose Paul, for Myself, before I formed the World. Just like the king, Paul's heart was always like a stream in My Hand which I always directed through My good plan and pleasure. Wisdom, understanding or counsel against Me cannot exist! There is only My Wisdom, Understanding and Counsel! I formed Paul, as a lump of clay in My Hand; no one resists My Will!

'For there is no respect of persons with God.' Rom 2:11 Paul

And all through our lives, our hearts have been streams of water in God's Hand, to be directed exactly where He had always planned. Paul is no different, to God, than are you and I; God is no respecter of persons. His plan for your Earthly life, and mine, are no less important to Him than was Paul's life on Earth. He molded and hardened Saul's heart unto that of an antichrist who sought to destroy and erase the True Church. But then, in a flash, God miraculously recreated Saul: from one who could have been a soon to be forgotten enemy of

the Lord Jesus Christ unto the man He would use to lay the foundation for His Beloved Body and Bride, nearly all the Doctrinal Truth upon which He would build His True Church.

God was always Sovereign in Paul's life and He has always been Sovereign over our lives; He has formed us and directed us, always toward His perfect ending for us: that we would be prepared to glorify Him as we rule and reign with Him for 1000 years and then forever.

'...forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, ¹⁴ I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.' Philippians 3:13

When the Lord Jesus Christ said, to Saul, *'Why do you persecute Me?'* He meant the True Church, His Body and Bride. People hate God but since they cannot 'get' to Him, they spend their hatred upon His people.

Verse 5: *'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.'*

Here is the proof that God has been working His Will and Plan in and through Saul/Paul, all along.

When Jesus says, 'It's hard for you to kick against the pricks,' the idea is of a stick with a thorn, a goad with which the herder directs his animal... left/right/forward/backward... This goading did not begin at the moment of Saul's conversion... it has always been happening; it's the same as *'The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.'* God has been directing Paul, and us, all through our lives. 'You've been resisting My direction, Saul, you've kicked against it, trying to go another way, but you've found that My goad is all-powerful, it cannot be resisted.'

'A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.' Prov 16:9

*'There are many devices in a man's heart; **nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.***' Prov 19:21

Verse 6: *'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.'*

In a flash! all the fight is gone out of S/Paul. He has, in one moment been transformed from a self-righteous prideful arrogant, murderous wretch unto a humble, meek, mild, believing, already being formed into the image and likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ, child of God.

Verse 7: *'And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. ⁸ And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.'*

The others heard God's Voice but saw nothing and what they heard left them speechless. Once before, when God spoke, those hearing His Voice thought it had thundered: Jesus said: *'Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him. Jesus answered and said, This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes.'* John 12:27

This time, the Voice was definitely for Saul's sake he had never heard God's Voice but in the coming years he would come to hear and know God's Voice often: when he was harpazoed/raptured up into Heaven, he would have come to know the Voice of the Lord Jesus Christ intimately as He taught Paul so very much of our Church Doctrine; then, he would have heard the Holy Spirit's Voice throughout his writings to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians, to Timothy, Titus, Philemon and possibly to the Hebrews and, doubtless, to many others, copies of which no longer exist.

Verse 9: *'And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.'*