

THE PERSECUTION AND CONVERSION OF SAUL

1) Saul and his religion as a Pharisee.

- a) Saul, or later Paul, never hid from the fact that he had been a Pharisee.
 - i) Acts 23:6.
 - ii) Acts 26:4-5.
- b) When listing reasons he could have used for staying in Judaism and trusting in the flesh, he said that “as touching the law” he was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).
- c) Who were the Pharisees?
 - i) The Pharisees were a section of Jews who were very pious outwardly.
 - ii) The name “Pharisee” seems to come from the Hebrew word for “separate” and means “separatist”.
 - iii) They did everything they could do to be separate from any legal contamination.
 - iv) At first, this group focused mainly on religion but later got involved politically.
 - v) They never obtained a majority on the Sanhedrin Council, but had large enough numbers that they were powerful.
 - vi) Their piety led them to have prominence with the people.
- d) What is interesting about the Pharisees is that they were the most vehement attackers of Jesus and Jesus said more negative things about them than any other group.
 - i) Jesus showed their hypocrisy when stressing the physical aspects of cleanliness over being spiritually clean.
 - ii) Their power lay in their popularity with the people and when Jesus acceded their popularity, they had to do something about it.
 - iii) We know that Jesus pointed out that devotion to God comes from the heart, while nothing came from the heart of the Pharisees.
 - iv) With Jesus it was inward leading to outward, and the Pharisees were merely outward only.
- e) Saul had grown up this way.
 - i) He was the son of a Pharisee.
 - ii) He described as the most difficult sect of the Jewish religion.
- f) Saul had been dedicated to it above any of his peers (Galatians 1:14).
- g) So we see that Saul was a devout Pharisee who was totally dedicated to the advancement and defense of Judaism because it was his way of life.
- h) This background information is important because it sets the stage for why Saul reacted to Christianity and the gospel message the way that he did.

2) Saul and his reaction to gospel.

- a) I came across something to which I had not paid attention before studying for this sermon.
 - i) Notice Acts 6:9-10.

- ii) Stephen, one of the men put forth by the Jerusalem church to take care of the widows, was debating with Jews of the synagogue made up of Jews born outside of Jerusalem.
 - iii) Notice who made up this synagogue: Libertines, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, them of Cilicia, and some of Asia.
 - iv) Why is this important you might ask?
 - v) Acts 21:39.
 - vi) Saul was probably one of them of Cilicia mentioned in Acts 6:9, engaged in disputing with Stephen.
 - vii) Under Jewish law, there had to be two or three witnesses in order to put someone to death.
 - viii) We know that those involved in the stoning of Stephen laid their coats down at the feet of a young man named Saul.
 - ix) It is extremely likely that Saul was one of those engaged in this disputation with Stephen.
- b)** His reaction to the gospel message being preached was one of hatred and a desire to stamp it out of existence.
- c)** Why would he react so violently towards those that preached and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ?
- i) The gospel of Christ teaches the preeminence of Jesus.
 - ii) Saul believed with all that he was that the Pharisaical tradition of the Mosaic Law was the only means of salvation.
 - iii) It was an external religion while Christianity was about a complete surrender of the heart to the will God that results in an outward change of actions and speech.
 - iv) Christianity stood in stark contrast to all that Saul would have held dear
- d)** Because of that, Saul sought to destroy this system of religion from off the face of the earth.
- i) Acts 8:1-3.
 - ii) The word translated “havock” is only found here in the New Testament.
 - (1) About it, Thayer wrote, “to treat shamefully or with injury, to ravage, devastate, ruin”.
 - (2) He then wrote, “said of Saul as the cruel and violent persecutor”.
 - iii) The word translated “haling” means “to draw, drag”.
 - (1) It is used in John 21:8 to describe the way the fishermen had to draw in the net full of fish.
 - (2) It is used later when Paul was stoned and drug out of the city to be left for dead.
 - (3) So we see that Saul was literally dragging brethren out of their homes to take them to prison.
 - iv) Some of those that he dragged into prison were put to death (Acts 26:10).
 - v) Others he coerced with punishment to blaspheme the name of Christ in order to end their punishment (Acts 26:11).

- vi) He then described himself as being in a rage against Christians (Acts 26:11).
- vii) He was so enraged by Christianity that he was willing to go into foreign cities where the Sanhedrin Council had no power to arrest Christians.
- e) It is at this point that Saul decided to go to Damascus.
 - i) It is not really evident why he chose to go there but it seems as if it was known that the authorities would respond well to his requests.
 - ii) It is interesting that once Saul was converted and began to preach in Damascus that the Jews did not hesitate to try and kill him, so there must have been some sort of agreement between the Jews and the leadership of Damascus.
- f) Saul had a very violent reaction to the preaching of the gospel because he believed that it was a rejection of all that he held dear, when in reality, it was simply the fulfillment of all that he held dear as he would later realize.

3) Saul and his redemption from sin.

- a) Saul received authority from the council to go to Damascus and bring back Jews who had converted to Christ.
- b) Upon receiving the authority, he and a group of men began the journey to Damascus.
- c) Acts 9:3-8; Acts 22:6-11; Acts 26:12-18.
 - i) Saul was blessed with the opportunity and privilege of speaking with Jesus, though Saul did little of the speaking.
 - ii) Jesus knew the type man Saul was and what he was capable of doing when pointed in the right direction.
 - iii) For this reason, Saul was chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles.
 - iv) However, before he could be the apostle to the Gentiles, he had to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus.
- d) The Lord spoke to a Christian in Damascus named Ananias, who then went to Saul after some coaxing by the Lord.
 - i) When he went to him, he told him what he needed to do to be redeemed.
 - ii) Acts 22:16.
 - iii) Saul, as those he had persecuted had done, needed to be baptized into Christ.
- e) Saul was not saved on the road to Damascus as some teach.
- f) Saul was saved when his sins were washed away, which took place when he was baptized by Ananias.
 - i) If Saul had been saved on the road to Damascus, there would have been no reason for his fasting that we read of in Acts 9:9.
 - ii) He would have been rejoicing and immediately preaching like he did after he was baptized.
- g) From that point on, Saul, who later changed his name to Paul, began a preaching career that has never been duplicated.
 - i) He went on three missionary journeys across Asia and later to Greece.
 - ii) He preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike.
 - iii) He died a martyr's death in Rome.

- h)** There has never been one like Saul of Tarsus.
- i)** He was a man who imminently one-sighted.
 - i)** He was obsessed with pleasing God.
 - ii)** He lived his life in all sincerity, even when persecuting the church because he truly believed Christians were blaspheming God.
 - iii)** He did what he did with a pure conscience (Acts 23:1).
- j)** Saul had a love for souls that allowed him to overcome any previous prejudice towards Gentiles and preach to them the whole counsel of God.
- k)** Saul's redemption was because of the power of the gospel being combined with a heart that had as its only desire to be pleasing to God.

Some material for this sermon came from manuscripts by Steve Ellis and Garland Elkins.