

Paul- Persecutor to Preacher - Rev. Kenny I Macleod

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back again to the chapter we read in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9, and reading again at verse 15. The words of the Lord to Ananias.

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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Now as we know that this man Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul was without doubt one of the greatest men that ever lived. Paul was an incredible trophy of grace.

And we often use that expression about a person being a trophy of grace. We say, oh, is that he or she? What a trophy of grace? Meaning there's somebody who had lived a particular lifestyle which was the very opposite of the gospel and maybe a very, very un-Christian life.

Then they're converted and people say, oh, it's a real trophy of grace. But you know, every Christian is a trophy of grace. Because it is only by God's grace that we are saved.

[1 : 23] It is by God's grace that we are transformed. Even the most upright person, the most diligent church attender, who is still outside the kingdom, is still as far away and is still lost.

And it is only by grace that that person will come into a union and into faith with the Lord Jesus Christ. So every Christian, if you tonight are here and you've been born again that you're trusting the Lord Jesus Christ, you are a living trophy of grace.

But Paul was, what we might say, an exceptional trophy of grace because he moved from being the number one persecutor of all things to do with the Lord Jesus Christ.

He hated the name of Christ with a passion. And his sole purpose, his sole mission in this world was to round up and to hound and to persecute and to imprison and have put to death the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he moved from that to become this amazing ambassador for the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the name of Christ with a commitment and a zeal which was almost bordering on the frightening.

[2 : 41] And it's little wonder that in chapter 9, in verse 21, where Paul, after he had got his sight back and after he had eaten and he had been a few days with the disciples, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue saying, He is the Son of God.

And it tells in verse 21, And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem? I think it's very hard for us to grasp the absolute shock that people must have gone through, experienced when they saw this man Saul, who had come down to Damascus to kill and to bind and to imprison and to drag back to Jerusalem, all who followed the Lord Jesus Christ in the synagogue, preaching Christ and saying, Yes, he is the Son of God.

Jesus is exactly who he says he is. And I've often, sometimes it's good for us to try and put our mind right back and think, I wonder what would it have been really like?

Because if ever people were to get a shock, that was the absolute shock of all. Paul's commitment to Christ was absolutely extraordinary.

He summed it up really by saying, For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain or more of Christ. So we find in chapter 9, Saul is now blinded, furious, riding fast to Damascus in order to arrest the Christians.

[4 : 24] But before he reaches Damascus, Jesus has arrested Saul. There's a complete U-turn here. And you see, sadly, Saul thought that he was doing God's work.

The Jews, and it's so sad when you read how it was when Jesus was here in this world.

As it tells us in John, he came to his own, and his own received him not. Because the Jews, yes, they believed in the coming Messiah, but they were persuaded that when the Messiah came, that he was coming to establish a kingdom.

Well, that's what Jesus exactly did. But they hadn't grasped that it was going to be a spiritual kingdom. They thought it was going to be an earthly kingdom, like King David, how David had established the rule all round.

He was the supreme king. And sort of all the nations round about were subject to. They thought that when the Messiah would come, it would be something similar to this.

[5 : 30] So when Jesus came the way he did come, they wouldn't believe, they wouldn't accept, and they were absolutely persuaded that this was not the Messiah.

And nobody was more persuaded of it than the Apostle Paul. Now, of course, this is what is so strange, is that these Pharisees, these religious zealots, zealots, these real students of the Word of God, should have known, because they were studying God's Word.

But they were so blinkered in their own opinion that their mind wasn't sufficiently open to grasp that if they had just studied the prophecies, they would have seen in the life of Christ that everything was being fulfilled.

And that's a problem sometimes if we're prejudiced, if we're bigoted, if we're blinkered, that our mind isn't sufficiently open to take note and to see what is actually staring us in the face.

So Saul, like so many of these religious fanatics, wouldn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God. And what added to it above all was that Jesus ended up on the cross.

[6 : 48] And they were saying, there is no way that that could happen. Because the Scripture said, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. And so they were saying, there is no way that God would have His Son be cursed, have the Messiah be cursed.

But that's exactly God's purpose and plan was that Jesus was to take our curse upon Himself.

That's exactly what happened. And so as a devout Jew, Saul was determined to root out at the very start all those who followed the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because the word, of course, we're going around now, was that Jesus had risen from the dead. But of course, we know what had happened, that the chief priests and those, they paid the guards money and they were saying, you've got to say that the disciples came and stole the body of Christ. And so there was this hush-hush and determination not to accept what has actually happened. And yes, the followers of Jesus were performing miracles.

Saul, like the others were saying, it was through the power of Satan that they were doing it. And so there was this determination at the very start to rid the whole place of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 15] And Saul, as we said, like so many people, had this huge problem with the cross. And it's still the same today. A lot of people have a problem with the cross. Paul said that.

To the Jews, it's a stumbling block. To the Greeks or to the Gentiles, it's foolishness. And so many people look on the cross as foolish. They cannot understand.

They cannot believe. Why would God, why would God put His Son on the cross? Because people have never come to understand the nature of sin.

And you see, that's why people don't like the Bible. Because the Bible exposes us to ourselves. It exposes our responsibility before God, our accountability to God.

The Bible shows us up for who we are and what our duty is to God. And people don't like that, don't want that. Because you see, we live in a world where everybody is king or queen of his or her life.

[9 : 19] We live in a day, and it's one of the massive changes that we see. And you see it so much through in social media and all these things. Everybody has an opinion, but nobody's allowed to have an opinion contrary to your opinion.

My opinion, my opinion counts. Nobody else, how dare you have a different opinion to mine. Mine is what, I am, I am, I am in charge. It's my life, and I'll do what I want.

No, it's not. It is God who has given us this life. It is for God's glory and purpose that we were born into this world, not for ourselves.

And that cuts right across. So, today's society don't want to hear that, they don't want to think about that, they don't want to be confronted by that. And so, the cross is something that people have nothing or want nothing to do with at all.

and even people who may come to church, they still, we mentioned that this morning, people, we still have this kind of idea that I'm good enough, what we term our own self-righteousness.

[10 : 30] And we say, God will, I know that, I know I'm not perfect, but you know, God will still accept me. We kid ourselves on that God will still accept me.

No, He cannot because He is God. He cannot accept us unless we have become acceptable through His Son.

That's why Jesus came. If we were able to make ourselves right with God, there was no need for Jesus to come. It's because we can't. And so, we have to come to this place and this point.

And as we were saying this morning, it is through our eyes being opened to see ourselves and to see the Lord as the only way of salvation.

And so, this is what happened to Saul. He had gone from the most self-righteous Jew to seeing that there is none righteous, no, not one. And so, Paul, as a proud legalist, was soon to discover that his only hope in life was in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 38] And so, this Jesus, who he thought was dead, he was just going to discover, was very, very, very much alive. And so, we find Jesus addressing Saul from heaven and he said to him, he asks, he makes that question and he said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

And what does Saul do? he falls to the ground. You know, a lot of people think that come the judgment where we all have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

People have in their mind the idea of the human Jesus who walked this world. That it's going to be on the judgment day, it's man to man or woman to man.

That's how it's going to be, that we just face the human. Yes, Jesus has retained his human. He took a human nature and continues forever. The two natures in the one person, divine and human. He remains and retains that forever. But there's been a change. Yes, it's the same Jesus, but what a transformation. If we want a wee glimpse of, and I know it's by way of vision that John was given in the Revelation.

[13 : 04] But if we want, when you go home, have a wee look at it. You know it, John chapter 1 and verses 12 to 16, 17, Revelation 1, 16, verses 12 to about 16 or 17.

John has given this glimpse of the risen Jesus. It's awesome. And we're told in Philippians that before Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

There'll be no skeptics on that day. There'll be no sense of bravado from anybody. They are not meeting just like another human. Yes, human, as we said, he retains. But here he is, glorified son of God.

And that's the response. When Saul was given this glimpse, he fell down like one dead. When John was given this vision and revelation, he fell down as one dead until the Lord put his hand upon him and said, fear not.

So we've always got to remember that this is a Jesus that we are to appear before at the judgment seat. So Saul was to discover this awesome thing, discovery at this moment.

[14 : 20] So he discovers that Jesus is very much alive. And Jesus says to him, why are you persecuting me? You see, the persecution of the Christian is persecution of Christ.

Why are Christians not liked? It's because people don't like Jesus Christ. There's no other reason. And it's funny how people who can be part of a circle, part of a company, and they're all one together and then one person is converted.

and sometimes, not always, sometimes, but quite often people have a totally different view of them in a moment. And sometimes they get a hard time from people who are their friends.

Why? Because of the Christ that is within them for no other reason. It's the hostility, the rebellion, the enmity in the world that is against Christ.

And so every persecution of the Christian, which is that we find is because Christ is within them.

And so Jesus is saying to Saul, you're persecuting me.

[15 : 27] By persecuting my people, you're persecuting me. You see, Christ is the head. We are the body. And so the head feels what the body is suffering. And so Saul on that very day is going through a massive learning experience and discovering that Jesus is the Son of God, the Jesus that he thought was dead is very, very much alive.

It was C.S. Lewis who said there are only three possibilities with regard to Jesus. The first he said is that Jesus was the greatest imposter that ever walked this world.

And yet when you read his life, you say, well, that doesn't add up. The second is that he was the most deluded person that ever walked this world. and again when you read his life, that doesn't add up.

But he said the third and the only other possibility is that he is exactly who he says he is. And that in turn means that we have no liberty anymore to ignore him but that we have a duty to fall down before his feet confessing him.

And that is true. That Jesus is exactly who he says he is. And so Saul made that discovery on this day. But Saul also discovered that Jesus had a plan for him.

[16:57] And Jesus has a plan for our lives. The day you become a Christian, everything changes. Yes, you're the same person and you're the same family and doing the same things and involved in this and that that you always were.

But there's a difference because you're now living to and for somebody else. You're no longer living to self. Of course, that's a big, the big problem you have in life is the problem with yourself.

It's the biggest problem. I know we have problems with the world, we have problems with the devil and they are great problems but the biggest problem of all that we have is everything that goes on within ourselves.

Conflict in here between flesh and spirit and all that that involves. But the thing is that we have this new master ruling in our lives and Jesus has a plan for us all.

And it's one of the things that we should often say to the Lord is, Lord, what do you want me to do? We need to be asking the Lord to direct us and to show us because, you know, the Lord is always opening up windows of opportunity for us that we never expected.

[18:13] And it's important that we're always open to the Lord's leading, the Lord's directing, the Lord's guiding. And we should always be seeking to make ourselves available for the Lord to do whatever he would have us to do.

But Saul was also going to discover that in following and serving the Lord Jesus Christ, it was going to involve suffering. Because in verse 15 it tells us, I chose an instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

And, you know, this is the amazing thing about grace, how it changes a person. Before this happened to Saul, if a Gentile, a non-Jew walked into the room, Saul would go out, he didn't want to come anywhere near a non-Jew.

He felt he would be defiled by them. Because he was a real, true, legalistic Jew. Now that he's become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, he embraces the Gentiles, the very people that he shunned.

He has now got a heart for them. And that's what grace does. It transforms us from the inside out. That is why we become new people. Now we know that Saul suffered a lot.

[19:38] You just have to read his testimonies. Every so often as he's writing his letters, he tells us some of the things that he suffered along the way. But side by side with the sufferings, he was given some awesome insights into the glory of the Lord.

Saul was given manifestations of God's glory that few were ever privileged to see. But you know the funny thing is that offering, often side by side with great grace and great understanding and sense of the Lord's closeness and presence, there is often suffering.

Not always, but often. Some of the most radiant Christians that I've ever met are those who have gone through some of the most difficult things in life.

And they are displaying the wonderful grace of God. Now, as we see, chapter nine, it's actually a really exciting and thrilling chapter.

And you expect, as you see, Saul can hardly wait to get out and to start preaching. So you think, there's chapter nine, he escapes with his life in Damascus, and you would think that chapters 10, 11, 12 in Acts would be full of Paul's exploits.

[20:59] But it's not until chapter 13 that we pick up again with Paul. So what's happened? Well, before the great man can become the great man that he is, God has to work in the life of the apostle Paul.

Paul is not ready to become the great missionary, the great servant of the Lord. Probably at this stage, the apostle Paul would say, would be still able to glory in who he was.

But very shortly, that was all going to change, because Paul was going to be taught of the Lord. And the Lord will often do that with his people, that he'll pull them aside, and he'll work in them. And these are often the silent times, the times that nobody else is aware of, just between yourself and the Lord. And God will often make his people wait and wait and wait.

these were Paul's hidden years, and he makes reference to them in Galatians, and maybe a wee bit in Corinthians as well. And sometimes it appears that God is doing nothing.

[22 : 06] But God is never doing nothing. I think a classic example of all is the life of Moses. You remember how Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter.

and Moses who led the children of Israel out of Egypt. God made sure that Moses had the best preparation possible for 40 years.

He was brought up in Egypt, the leading country there in the world, and he was given the best education possible. He was given the best teaching in administration, in government, and all these things because there was a possibility one day he might end up as a pharaoh.

So he was given all the privileges as a prince growing up in Egypt. And at the age of 40, if God had said to Moses, now Moses, I want you to lead my people out of Egypt.

I'm almost sure Moses would have said, yes Lord, I'm your man. But remember what happened.

Moses saw an Egyptian beating up terribly an Israelite, and he killed the Egyptian, buried him in the sand.

[23 : 21] But it was discovered and Moses had to run. And for the next 40 years, Moses is in the desert, looking after, he becomes a shepherd, looking after his father-in-law's sheep.

And throughout these 40 years, God is molding and breaking Moses. Moses. And at the end of 40 years in God's sight, Moses is now ready.

He wasn't ready 40 years earlier, but he's ready now. And when God calls Moses to lead his people out of Israel, Moses is saying, oh no, not me Lord.

I can't, my brother, ask my brother, not me, anybody else, not me. You see what has happened? God has broken him.

And it's the broken people that God uses. That's how it was with the apostle. That's how it was with Elijah. Before he could take on the mighty powers of Ahab and Jezebel, he was by the brook Cherith, in isolation, being fed by the ravens.

[24 : 30] Same with Joseph. Before he could become God's great man in Egypt, he spent years in the dungeon and forgot rottenness. Poor Joseph, he suffered for doing no wrong at all, but God was breaking him.

But in due time, God raised him up to become second only to Pharaoh. Same with David, anointed as king, killed the giant. The women in Jerusalem sang, David, Saul, slain as thousands, and David as tens of thousands.

He was the man. For years, David was running as public enemy number one, a Saul, was determined to kill him. Instead of living in a palace, he was hiding in caves, living in the mountains. Until God was ready, he was breaking him, breaking him. And that's the way God prepares his people, and that's what God was doing here with the apostle Paul as well. You see, we're always in a hurry, but always ready.

God says no. And God is always making us wait. One of the hardest things to do. We sang that in Psalm 40, I waited patiently for the Lord.

[25 : 44] And scripture is full of this. Wait for the Lord. Wait in silence for the Lord. Wait on the Lord. Wait, wait, wait. And so that is why the apostle Paul later on was able to discover that as God broke him, he was being prepared for this great work.

And Paul was able to say, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. There was a day earlier on when Paul boasted in who he was.

Oh, I am a Jew of the Jew. I am of the right stock. My genealogy is brilliant. I'm right up there with the best of them. Later he counted all that as done worthless.

On the scrap heap with it. Only one thing counts is Christ Jesus and him crucified. And as God worked in the life of the apostle, molding and breaking and shaping him, he was then able to say that he was content.

He had learned contentment. Don't learn contentment overnight. Don't learn contentment out of a book. But through all the trials and tribulations that he went through.

[26 : 59] He had a thorn in the flesh. Oh my, how he prayed that the Lord would remove it. Oh Lord, take it away. The Lord said, no, my grace is sufficient for you.

And you know, it's one of the things we find in this world so difficult to understand. And we say, Lord, I could be far better. I could serve you far better.

Lord, if it wasn't for this, I could do so much more. And the Lord says, you know, actually, you're going to serve me better the way you are. My grace is sufficient for you.

Sometimes it's difficult for us because it goes against the flesh. But Paul became the great man through all these things, living in absolute dependence upon the Lord, going where the Lord told him to go, saying what the Lord told him to say.

And we find with this, we close, one of the great examples of Paul's willingness to do just exactly what the Lord said. Because Paul then, as time had gone on, he wanted to go to Asia Minor.

[28 : 03] He was setting up churches and he was visiting churches that were beginning to flourish and so on. And he wanted to go to Asia Minor and the Lord said, no, not just now. Remember the Macedonian call that he had.

And Paul went, he changed direction. He went a different direction because he believed he was following the Lord's leading. And that's so important for us.

And you know, we often want our whole life mapped out. And we're saying to the Lord, Lord, why has it got to be just day by day? I would like to know a wee bit into the future.

We would like to know almost chapter and verse of how the next number of years will be. The Lord says, no, that's not the way I work. Even the great father of the faithful, he went out, the Lord called him out of hour of the called ease.

And what does it tell us? He went out not knowing where he was going. He went out not knowing where he went. He was going step by step following the Lord by faith.

[29 : 07] And so it was with the great apostle. He didn't have chapter and verse laid out for the next number of years. And it's difficult for us. It's difficult to human nature, difficult to we want it all out.

But no, the Lord says, this is how faith works. You follow me day by day, step by step. And so we find one of the great incidents, one of the best known incidents on this, where Paul followed the leading of the Lord, came into Philippi.

And remember Lydia, of course, she was converted. There were people who came to faith. And then there was this young girl who had an evil spirit in her. And she was a fortune teller through the evil spirit.

And she was being exploited by these men. And she was crying after Paul and Silas. These are men, the living God. And remember how Paul rebuked the evil spirit.

And it left her. And of course, she was no longer a fortune teller. And the people who were exploiting her were mad. And they went to the authorities. And they said, these two guys who come in here, they've come to cause trouble.

[30 : 13] Now, of course, what the authorities didn't know was that Paul and Silas were actually Roman citizens. And they couldn't just be taken and thrown, beaten up and thrown into jail. They would have to face an honest trial.

But they didn't realize they were Roman citizens. And they were thrown into jail, beaten up into the maximum security wing of the prison. There they were.

And what I love is the attitude of Paul and Silas. We find them at midnight, praising God, singing praise to God. And I often think, you know, if that had been me, I think I might have found it difficult to praise God because here I was wanting to go another direction.

I had my plans and I was hoping that God would fit in with my plans. And then God says, no, I want you to go this way. So I've gone this way in obedience to the Lord.

Look at me. Look at where my back is pouring blood. I've been beaten up so badly. My feet, they're in the stocks. I can't move.

[31 : 20] Lord, why? That's not the way Paul and Silas are. They're singing praise to God. They know God's in control. And God, in response to the singing of their praise, an earthquake comes.

And we know the story of how the Philippian jailer, he thought that all the prisoners had escaped and he pulled out the sword to kill himself. Saul said, do yourself no harm.

And remember the question, what must I do to be saved? Paul said, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. Paul and Silas had to go into that prison for the salvation of that man.

We've got to remember that God will sometimes put us into places that we don't want to go in order to bring the gospel to somebody.

You might end up in hospital and you might be used by just a wee word to a person in the ward with you. You don't want to be there. You don't know the influence that you may have by your life, by what you see.

[32 : 31] There's lots of situations that we find ourselves in and we say, I didn't want to be here. But God is using you. You see, we're so caught up with just ourselves.

We've got to remember God is a big picture. And it's much bigger than you and me. So he will often put us in different situations for his glory's sake.

And so this is exactly what happened with Paul and Silas. And Paul, that message that Paul proclaimed, where he said, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, is the message he proclaimed in the marketplace, in the synagogues, in the prisons, before governors, before rulers, before kings, before queens, before everybody.

It wasn't another message. And it's still the same message tonight. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. And if you've never done that, it's high time that you did.

And that you said to the Lord, Lord, help me to believe. Help me over this gap between me and you. Help me, Lord.

[33 : 46] May your grace come into my heart and touch me. Bring your light to shine into my heart, that I may see you. Give me your grace in order that I may believe.

Pray that. And if you truly and sincerely pray that, the Lord will hear, the Lord will answer. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.

Let us pray. Lord, our God, we pray to bless us, and we give thanks for when we read about your great servant, the apostle, just the tremendous commitment and zeal, the energy, the passion that he had to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there is no other message that the world will ever need to hear. It is the most important message, the most powerful, message. Because the saving of a soul is more important than all the wealth of this world put together.

Help us always to remember that. What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? So we pray that you will bless us and part us with your blessing.

[34 : 53] Bless the fellowship tonight, and we ask your blessing upon all who do so much for your cause. Grant us your grace, take us to our home safely. Part us with your blessing in Jesus' name we ask it.

Amen. We're going to conclude singing in Psalm 130. This is from Sing Psalms, Psalm 130. From Sing Psalms, the whole psalm, the four verses.

Lord, from the depths I call to you, Lord, hear me from on high, and give attention to my voice when I for mercy cry.

Lord, in your presence who can stand, if you our sins record, but yet forgiveness is with you, that we may fear you, Lord. I wait, my soul waits for the Lord.

My hope is in his word. More than the watchman waits for dawn, my soul waits for the Lord. O Israel, put your hope in God, for mercy is with him, and full redemption from their sins.

[36 : 01] His people he'll redeem. The whole psalm, Lord, from the depths I call to you. Lord, from the depths I call to you, Lord, hear me from on high, and give attention to my voice when I for mercy cry.

Lord, in your presence you God's hand, if you are sins record, but yet forgiveness is with you, that we may fear you are.

I wait, my soul waits for the Lord.

My hope is in his word. More than the the war than waits for dawn, my soul waits for the Lord.

O Israel, build your hope in God, for mercy is with them, and full redemption from their sins, his people he will redeem.

[38 : 42] now, may the grace, mercy, and peace of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore.

Amen.