**Saul’s Threatenings and His Conversion**

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

 One evening a man was sitting next to a rather ditzy woman in a bar watching the 6:00 o’clock news. That night they were reporting on a man who was threatening to jump off a building. So the man said to the woman, “I’ll bet you ten bucks he jumps.” The woman agreed, and when the man jumped, she went to hand him the money. But he said, “Ah, I can’t take your money. I saw him jump on the afternoon news.” She replied, “I did too. I just didn’t think he would do it again!”

 Well, while that man might have been threatening to kill *himself,* as we come to our text in Acts 9:1-8, Saul of Tarsus is threatening to kill even more of the disciples of the Lord than he already had, as we see in the first couple of verses of our text:

 **“And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, 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” (Acts 9:1,2).**

Now you’ll notice that it says that Saul wasn’t just slaughtering the disciples of the Lord, and threatening to kill more of them. He was *“breathing out”* threatenings and slaughter. “What’s the difference?” you ask? Well, you know where breath *comes from,* don’t you? If you forgot, Paul reminds us in Acts 17:24,25:

 **“God…giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:24,25).**

Every breath we breathe in is a gift from God. It’s the thing that gives us life! When God created man,

**“God formed man of the dust…and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life…” (Genesis 2:7).**

So every time you take a breath, what you are breathing in is *the very life God gives you.* But what you breathe *out* is what you *do* with the life God gives you. And Saul was breathing out threatenings and slaughter. That means he *lived* to threaten and slaughter God’s people. He made it *his purpose in life* to threaten and slaughter the disciples of the Lord.

 Now compare that to what Saul said about his life after he got saved:

**“For to me to live is Christ…” (Philippians 1:21).**

So in other words, Saul went from being someone who lived to slaughter the disciples of the Lord to someone who *lived* for the Lord! That’s how dramatically salvation changed his life.

 And now that *you’re* saved, may I ask what you’re doing with the breath God gives you? The way you live your life can either bring praise to the Lord or dishonor to Him, so why not do what the psalmist recommended many centuries ago, and “Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord” (Ps. 150:6). Live each day in ways that praise Him.

 But speaking of living for the Lord, did you know that’s what Saul thought he was doing when he was persecuting the church? We know that because of what he said about his life later in Acts 23:1:

 **“…I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”**

That means when Saul’s hands dripped with the blood of the saints, his conscience was crystal clear. If you’re wondering how that could possibly be, consider what the Lord told His disciples in John 16:2:

**“They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, *that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.”***

You see, Saul thought that the disciples of the Lord were *heretics,* so he thought he was doing God’s will in killing them.

 What’s that tell you about letting your conscience be your guide, as we so often hear people say? Your conscience is like a sundial. As long as the sun is shining on it, it can give the correct time. But try to read it by moonlight and you’ll get the wrong time. And go out at night with a flashlight and you can make it any time you want!

In the same way, your conscience is only a good guide when the light of God’s rightly divided Word shines on it. If you let any other religion or philosophy of life shine on it, it will steer you in the wrong direction.

If you don’t believe me, just ask those religious men who flew those passenger jets into the World Trade Center on 9/11. I’m told Hitler’s soldiers wore belt buckles which read, “God is on our side.” I hear that that was the motto of the third reich. The world is *filled* with people shining the wrong light on their conscience. Make sure you shine the right one!

But in our last study we saw that Saul was a type of the Antichrist, who we kow will persecute God’s people in the Tribulation, as we see when John describes him as “the beast” and says, “it was given unto him to make war with the saints” (Rev. 13:4,7). The prophet Daniel predicted of the beast, “he shall…destroy the mighty and the holy people” (Dan.8:24). That sounds like breathing out threatenings and slaughter to me!

I actually think Saul was *more* than just a type of the antichrist. If God hadn’t interrupted His prophetic program with the dispensation of the mystery, I think Saul would have *become* the Antichrist. See if this prediction of antichrist of the antichrist and his cronies sounds like Saul to you. Speaking prophetically of them, David wrote,

**“…false witnesses are risen up against me, *and such as breathe out cruelty”* (Psalm 27:12).**

Doesn’t that sound like Saul?

 You say, “What makes you think David was talking about the antichrist and his storm troopers? Well, let’s back up a couple of verses to get the context, where David prefaced his remarks by saying,

**“*When my father and my mother forsake me*…mine enemies...breathe out cruelty” (Psalm 27:10,11).**

If you know your Bible, you know that in the Tribulation a lot of fathers and mothers will be forsaking their sons, as the Lord predicted in that terrible day when the beast will be wreaking havoc on the earth:

**“…the brother shall betray the brother to death, *and the father the son*….when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet…” (Mark 13:12-14).**

That means the context of Psalm 27 makes it a prediction of the Tribulation, and that means Saul and his followers fit the bill when it comes to this prediction of “such as breathe out cruelty.” So I think Saul was on a direct path to becoming the antichrist.

You say, but he *couldn’t* have been the antichrist, for he didn’t end up *being* the antichrist!” If that’s what you’re thinking, compare what we know about Saul to what God said about Elijah:

**“*I will send you Elijah the prophet* before the…dreadful day of the LORD” (Malachi 4:5).**

As you can see, God vowed to send Elijah back before the latter half of the Tribulation, the part known as the dreadful day of the Lord. But do you remember what the Lord said about that promise?

**“*John the Baptist*…if ye will receive it…*is Elias, which was for to come”* (Matthew 11:12,14).**

John the Baptist *would have been* Elijah if the people of Israel would have received “it,” and the *it* they needed to receive was the kingdom the Lord came to offer them. If His people in Israel had received it, John would have been Elijah. As it is, God will raise up *another* Elijah in the Tribulation.

 And the same is true for Saul of Tarsus. If God hadn’t interrupted His prophetic program, I think Saul would have been the antichrist, but now another antichrist will rise up in the Tribulation.

 I say all that to assure you that antichrist is not some poor hapless soul who was doomed to become the antichrist, and won’t have a choice in the matter. God predicted that there will *be* an antichrist, but He didn’t condemn some poor schmuck to *be* him. It’s kind of like how the prophets predicted that someone would betray the Lord, but they *didn’t* predict that *Judas* would do it. He was just a covetous man who wanted those pieces of silver, so he sold Him out.

 Now in our last study we saw Saul *start* slaughtering God’s people in Acts 8. And if you forgot how *good* he was at it, I remind you that Acts 8:1,3 says,

**“…at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; *and they were all scattered abroad…*as for Saul, *he made havock of the church,* entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.”**

Saul went after the church *so hard* that all the saints in Jerusalem got out of Dodge and left town! But rather than sit back and enjoy the results of a job well done, we see Saul here going to the high priest to get authorization to go to Damascus to start threatening and slaughtering people *there* as well.

And that’s *another* type of antichrist, as we see when John says of him,

**“…the beast...*the dragon gave him his power,* and his seat, *and great authority”* (Revelation 13:2).**

Antichrist is going to get his authority from Satan, just like Saul got his authority from the high priest.

 “Are you saying the high priest is a type of Satan?” Well, if the shoe fits, you have to wear it! Hey, if the devil entered into Judas before he betrayed the Lord, do you think maybe he might enter into the high priest after he stoned Stephen? Before those unsaved Jews stoned Stephen, the nation of Israel was the representative of God on earth. But afterward they became the representative of Satan on earth.

 But before you let that turn you into a hater of the nation of Israel, may I remind you that the current nation of Israel isn’t anything that God recognizes in the dispensation of grace. God is not blessing them for Abraham’s sake, and He is not cursing them for Stephen’s sake. There is absolutely no justification for being anti-semitic in the age of grace. Nor is there any justification for hating blacks, whites, policemen or anyone else.

 But before we move on in our text, I should point out that when Verse 2 says that Saul went to Damascus to find “any of this way,” that’s a name for the followers of the Lord Jesus, a name that comes from what He said in John 14:6,

 **“…*I am the way,* the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me”**

Later we read that after Paul preached a message, “…divers were hardened, and believed not, *but spake evil of that way”* (Acts 19:9). Later still, “there arose no small stir *about that way”* (19:23).

 These verses remind me to say that the Lord Jesus isn’t just one of *many* ways to God, He’s the *only* way! Have you ever heard the expression, “It’s my way or the highway”? Well, the next time you hear it, remember that’s true of the Lord, spiritually speaking. It’s His way or the highway to hell, so to speak.

 Now another thing I have to point out before we read on in our text is that where we are standing here in Acts 9:2 is the last verse of the dispensation of the law and kingdom, the last verse of God’s prophetic program. The dispensation of the mystery begins in Verse 3, where we read:

 **“And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3).**

Now in order to understand how this is the beginning of the dispensation of the mystery, we have to begin by talking about this light. For you see, this was no ordinary light, as we learn when Saul tells us about it in Acts 26:13:

 **“At midday…I saw in the way a light from heaven, *above the brightness of the sun…”***

Now if *you* were walking down the street one day, on your way to kill some people, and you saw a light that bright, you wouldn’t know what it was, of course. You’d probably think it was a UFO preparing to beam you up. But Saul knew his Bible well enough to know what it was. He knew what the Psalmist said in Psalm 104:1,2:

**“O LORD my God, Thou art very great; Thou art clothed with honour and majesty. *Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment.”***

Saul knew that any light that was brighter than the sun had to be an appearance of *God Himself.* That might explain what happens next in our text:

**“And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4).**

Now I personally don’t think that Saul fell down because the brightness of the light knocked him down. A bright light might startle you, but it generally doesn’t knock you off your feet, or off your horse, as some think Saul may have been riding. I think Saul was doing what Ezekiel did when *he* saw a bright light:

**“As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord*. And when I saw it, *I fell upon my face,* and I heard a voice of one that spake” (Ezekiel 1:28).**

Ezekiel knew the light he saw was God, so he fell on his face. And I think that was the case with Saul as well.

 By the way, here we learn that the light that Saul saw was probably not a brilliant white light. It was probably the color of a rainbow, as Ezekiel saw. If you’ve ever seen the way a prism refract slight, you know how it enables you to see all the colors that are always a part of natural sunlight but are undetectable by the naked eye. A rainbow acts as a natural prism, with water droplets doing the refracting instead of glass. According to Ezekiel’s testimony, our God dwells in a light that must be *stunningly gorgeous.*

But now, as we’ll see in a moment, the voice that Saul heard belonged to the Lord Jesus. But you’ll notice the Lord didn’t ask Saul why he was persecuting *His disciples.* He asked why he was persecuting *Him.* That’s because God takes it personally when you persecute His people, as we see when Isaiah said of the people of Israel, “In all their affliction *He* was afflicted” (Isaiah 63:9). Zechariah told His countrymen in Israel, “he that toucheth you *toucheth the apple of His eye”* (Zech. 2:8).And speaking of the Lord’s brethren in Israel, He Himself said,

**“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, *ye have done it unto Me”* (Matthew 25:40).**

So at this point, I think Saul is starting to put two and two together, and the light is beginning to dawn on him, so to speak! He knows that the light is God, and He knows who he’s been persecuting. So he’s pretty sure that the “God” He’s talking to is the God of the people he’s been killing. But just to make sure, he decides to ask, as we read on:

 **“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” (Acts 9:5).**

Now this verse reminds me of what happened when Moses asked God, as it were, “What shall I tell the people if they ask me Your name?” and

**“God said unto Moses…Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, *I Am* hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14).**

Well that was kind of an odd name, wasn’t it? A sort of an open-ended name. I mean, if I were Moses, I would have asked, “I am….*who?”* But now here, 1500 years later, God gives us His full name. “I am *Jesus.”*

 The “pricks” that the Lord mentions to Saul here were sharp sticks that they would use to get oxen to go in the direction they wanted them to go. Another name for a *prick* is a *goad,* as we see when we read in Judges 3:31,

**“Shamgar…slew of the Philistines six hundred men *with an ox goad”***

You may remember that later Samson slew 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. This brother dispatched 600 of them with an ox goad. Which makes you wonder if Samson wasn’t the only man endued with supernatural strength in the days of the judges.

 But if the ox didn’t *like* being goaded to go where he didn’t want to go, he’d *kick against it.* And what the Lord was talking about were the pricks *of conscience* that Saul had been experiencing while slaughtering God’s people. He knew the Bible well enough to know that the Lord Jesus matched the Old Testament prophecies of Israel’s Messiah, and God was using those prophecies to prick his conscience.

 But Saul didn’t *want* to believe that the lowly carpenter from Nazareth was the Christ that they’d been looking for for many centuries. So when he’d read his Bible, he’d kick against the pricks of conscience that God’s Word was giving him.

 Now I know good Christians like you would never do that. Yeah, right! Of course, when you do, it usually doesn’t lead to people getting slaughtered like it did with Saul. But I guarantee it will cause misery of some kind, both for you yourself and for all the people in your life. You’re better off learning to do what God says to do *and doing it,* in every area of your life, as Saul began to do as early as the very next verse in our text:

 **“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” (Acts 9:6).**

It’s not surprising to read that Saul was “trembling” as a result of his experience, for that’s what men always did in the presence of God. Habakkuk wrote,

**“O LORD, I have heard thy speech…God came from Teman…*And His brightness was as the light*…When I heard, *my belly trembled;* *my lips quivered at the voice:* rottenness entered into my bones, *and I trembled in myself…”* (Habakkuk 3:2,4,16).**

If you know your Bible, you know that any time anyone in the Bible even saw *an angel* they trembled, let alone get a glimpse of the Lord of glory.

 But when it says that Saul was also “astonished,” that begs the question: if Saul’s been suspecting that Jesus might be their Christ all along, what’s he so astonished about? I mean, it’s not like he just found out that *Zeus* was God (the god of the Greeks). He wouldn’t have seen that coming. He’d have been astonished at that. But his conscience had been telling him that Jesus might be his Christ, so why the astonishment?

 Well, the thing that I think astonished him was that *the Lord didn’t slay him on the spot!* He knew what was supposed to happen after the Jews rejected their Messiah. David predicted,

**“Then shall He speak unto them *in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure”* (Psalm 2:5).**

But the voice that *Saul* heard was anything but wrathful! You can tell just by the words that Luke records that the Lord spoke them *softly* and *tenderly:* “Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou Me?” instead of words like “Die, you mongrel!” He knew he had been spared the wrath that Psalm 2:5 and other Scriptures predicted should have fallen on those that reject God’s Anointed.

And he *also* knew that God was interrupting the prophetic program outlined in Psalm 2 and those other Scriptures, and doing something He hadn’t said He would do—and that the Lord was appearing to him *to ask him to do it!* So naturally he asks, “What wilt Thou have me to do?”

But the Lord knew that it was going to take Saul some time to process all of this and get used to the idea that he was wrong about Jesus Christ, and that he’d been murdering innocent people. So rather than put too much on his plate at once, He tells him to continue on into the city of Damascus and there he would find out what God wanted him to do.

But we know the Lord *did* tell him what *He* planned to do *with Saul,* for he later described the events of that day by saying,

**“…He said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: *for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose,* to make thee a minister…Delivering thee from the people, *and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee*, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light…*that they may receive forgiveness of sins*…”\* (Acts 22:15-18).**

\*This tells you that the Gentiles didn’t receive forgiveness of sins automatically when Christ died on the cross, as some of our grace pastors and teachers are saying.

 Here we see Saul fill in some of the parts of the story that we don’t see in Acts 9. As you can see, the Lord sent him to be “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13) right from the get go. And in order for him to do that, God had to introduce a*a whole new dispensation,* for as we’ve seen over and over in this study of Acts, Jerusalem and Israel had to get saved *before* the Gentiles under the old dispensation of law and the kingdom.

 So that’s what the Lord wanted to do *with Saul.* But as far as what He wanted *Saul* to do once he got to Damascus, we later learn that He wanted him to meet up with a man named Ananias and have *him* tell Saul what to do, as we see when Saul related the story in Acts 22:11-16:

**“I came into Damascus. And one Ananias…Came unto me, and stood, and said …*arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins,* calling on the name of the Lord.”**

Now calling on the name of the Lord while getting baptized would be hard to do if baptism were by immersion, as our Baptist friends insist. Calling on the Lord’s name is much easier when you consider that the Bible describes the mode of water baptism as that of *sprinkling* over and over again.

 But now that we know what the Lord anted Saul to do, the question is: Why did he want him to do it? You say, “to wash his sins away, like we just read!” But I personally believe that Saul got saved on Damascus Road. “Before he got his sins washed away?” Well, that’s the reason *Ananias* said Saul should be baptized, but I don’t think that’s the reason *the Lord* wanted him to do it. Remember, the Lord didn’t tell him to go into the city and he’d be told what to do *and why.* He just said he’d be told what to do. I think the Lord wanted Saul to be baptized for a different reason, a reason we read about across the page from our text in Acts 9:26,27:

 **“And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.**

 **“But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.”**

 If Saul had not been baptized, I don’t think the apostles would have cared *how* boldly he preached in Damascus. If he hadn’t been baptized with water, they wouldn’t have believed he was saved, for those were the terms of salvation at that time (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). *That’s* why the Lord wanted Saul baptized, to prove to the apostles that he was a believer.

 But as we read on, we find out that Saul wasn’t traveling alone on his grim mission to Damascus:

 **“And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man” (Acts 9:7).**

 As you can see, when Saul set out to kill believers in Damascus, he decided to bring some henchmen along with him. And when it says they heard a voice but saw no man, that means they didn’t see the Lord like Saul did. But they *did* hear the Lord’s voice. Of course, that doesn’t seem to square with what Saul said later, when he said of them,

**“…they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; *but they heard not the voice of Him that spake to me”* (Acts 22:9).**

But what you’re seeing here is not a contradiction. It’s an example of something that happened to the Lord when He prayed,

**“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”* (John 12:28,29).**

That means they heard *a thundering voice,* but weren’t able to make out the words that the Father spoke to His Son that day, for they were meant for Him and Him alone.

 And that’s what happened to the hired guns that were following in Saul’s wake as well. Remember, in sending him to the Gentiles before Israel got saved, God was revealing the mystery, and the mystery was revealed *only to Paul—*as we’re seeing symbolized here when Saul was the only one who could hear the Lord speak those words.

 Now as we read on, we see Saul had closed his eyes during all of this to protect them from the extreme brightness of God’s light:

 **“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.**

 **“And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink” (Acts 9:8,9).**

When Saul opened his eyes after shielding them from the blinding light, he learned that he’d been blinded by the light of God’s glory, as he later testified when he said,

**“*I could not see for the glory of that light,* being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus” (Acts 22:11).**

We know Saul had eye trouble the rest of his life, and it is very possible that this is when the Lord gave him that thorn in the flesh. Ananias later helped him see, but perhaps his sight wasn’t *completely* restored, according to God’s plan to keep him from glorying in the abundance of the revelations that was given to him.

 But in closing, I remind you that to save Saul, God had to start a whole new dispensation. Don’t forget Saul described himself later as “*a blasphemer*,” (I Tim. 1:13), and speaking of blasphemers, the Lord said,

 **“…blasphemy against the Holy Ghost *shall not be forgiven unto men*…neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (Matthew 12:31,32).**

When Saul blasphemed the Spirit by killing a man filled with the Spirit, and a lot of other believers who were filled with Him as well, he committed what is called the unpardonable sin. Blasphemy of the Spirit wasn’t supposed to be forgiven in the world in which the Lord spoke those words, nor in the world to come. So how could the Lord forgive Saul?

 The only answer is that in saving him, the Lord introduced *a whole new world,* an entirely new dispensation, a new world order, so to speak. A new world order called “the dispensation of the grace of God” (Eph. 3:2), tucked in between the world the Lord lived in and the world to come that will follow this present dispensation. A world that the prophets knew nothing about. A world called the dispensation of the mystery.

 But if you’re not saved, you need to know that there isn’t anything you’ve said or done that God won’t forgive in the dispensation of grace. I can’t tell you how many times I get emails at *Berean Bible Society* from troubled souls who believe they have committed the unpardonable sin. All because preachers who don’t rightly divide the Word have terrified them into thinking that the unpardonable sin is one that you can commit today in the age of grace. But Saul of Tarsus is living, breathing proof that God can save *even you,* no matter who you are or what you’ve done, if you’ll just believe His Son died to pay for your sins.