Pastor Jim West  
September 25, 2016  
Acts: Saul—the Profile of a Religious Terrorist  
Acts 9: 1-9; Acts 21, 22, 26


This morning I will devote an entire message to helping you get to know this man Saul prior to his conversion. As I’ve said before, in every good sermon there is some teaching and some preaching, but my message this morning (probably not the best ‘sermon’) will be mostly teaching so that you will have a very informed understanding of who Saul was prior to this story that we just read in Acts 9. If you don’t know Saul the religious terrorist, you truly cannot appreciate Paul the Apostle of Jesus, and since Paul will be a leading character throughout the rest of Acts, we need to camp out here for a bit and learn some history. As always, the manuscript of this message will be available online, so feel free to download the text later today instead of taking notes, because I will be moving quickly through a great deal of information. First…a few disclaimers.

For those of you who have attended church for some time, you probably think that you know Saul/Paul quite well, and perhaps you do. But I will tell you this: as I researched Paul in preparation for this message, I learned quite a bit that helped connect some dots that I had not connected previously…so tune in…I think this information will be helpful in the way you understand the New Testament.

Now, for those of you who are new to the faith, or you are not yet of the age where you can even possibly fathom caring about this subject, or you’re here to appease your spouse but you are hoping to simply get this over with…look at me for just a moment. Listen…history is your friend. Only fools ignore what has happened in the past, and always at great peril to themselves and those they influence. By the time I am finished this morning, if you have listened carefully, you will discover a similar resume as to the likes of Osama Bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, along with any number of other religious terrorists throughout history. I want you to think about that, because here’s what we can learn from the life of Saul: the very best of well-intentioned, intelligent people can allow their religious convictions to justify evil behavior. We’ve seen this tendency occur in multiple religions for thousands of years, and such is the reason that so many people have a very bad opinion of religion, as they should.

However, as we consider what happens to Saul on this road to Damascus, we will discover a God who pursues this violent, religious zealot...dare I say this terrorist…and transforms him into a completely new person who brings hope to the world. Now that is a great story…it is a story, by

(c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
the way, that is completely unique to Christianity…but we’re not there yet. First, we must contemplate the resume of a religious terrorist named Saul.

A Child of Tarsus
First, we learn from Saul himself in Acts 21:39 that he was born into a family of Pharisees in the Cilician city of Tarsus (show map). Saul’s place of birth and his family history accounts for why Saul is also called Paul. Regardless of what you may have heard, the truth is that Saul was likely always called Paul and vice-versa, depending on what room he was standing in. Saul was his Jewish name, used by family and other Jews in the local synagogue. “Paul” was his Roman name, and since he was raised in a Hellenistic, free city of the Roman Empire as a Roman citizen, he would have been addressed as “Paul” by non-Jews in his home town, and eventually, by non-Jews in all the cities he traveled to. The fact that this Hellenistic-Jewish boy has two names…a Jewish name and a “Gentile” name…foreshadows the role he will eventually play for God’s great plan to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ into Jewish and Gentile cities. It would take a man with dual-citizenship to walk in both worlds. I think it will become very clear that God chose Saul long before this day on the road to Damascus. Everything about Saul’s life and heritage prepares him to play the role that only he could play in the advancement of the Gospel. Take the city in which he was born, for example.

Tarsus was no ordinary city; in fact, Saul states in Acts 21:39, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.” Saul wasn’t just bragging…he was stating a well-known fact. Tarsus was one of the most highly regarded cities throughout the Roman Empire. Tarsus is very old, dating all the way back to 4000 BC according to some scholars. The city served as a primary trade route between the west and the east, and due to its large and secured inland harbor, many empires found the city to be a strategic location, including the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Egyptians. In 66 BC, the government of Cilicia and the capitol city of Tarsus passed into the hands of the Romans. The great Roman general Mark Antony made Tarsus a tax-free city which increased its appeal. Tarsus was well known as one of the leading “university” cities within the Roman Empire. In fact, the Greek historian Strabo described Tarsus as having “surpassed Athens and Alexandria and any other city in the empire that had schools and lectures of philosophers.” Strabo highly praised the city’s zeal for philosophy and all forms of education that was common among the citizenship of Tarsus. The university was devoted exclusively to serve the citizens of Tarsus, with a high percentage of the population attending. There were five famous Stoic philosophers who resided in Tarsus. So, anyone from Tarsus was thought to be well educated, astute in the field of philosophy, and certainly esteemed as coming from one of the most highly thought of cities in all the empire. We see that kind of assumption communicated by Festus, the governor of Caesarea, who acknowledges in Acts 26:24 that Saul had “great learning.” Many scholars have noted that Saul regularly quotes philosophers and assimilates some of his Tarsus education into his arguments. Not only was Saul highly educated

(c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
in Tarsus, he also enjoyed the status of Roman citizenship, which he inherited from his father. We don’t know how his father (or grandfather) accomplished the status of Roman citizenship. It would have certainly been an exception rather than the rule for Jews in an occupied city. Roman citizenship could either be purchased for a large sum of money, or granted as an award for great service to the empire. Likely Saul’s family served in a way that earned them such an honor.

As a Jewish boy raised in Tarsus, Saul would not only have been educated in the schools, he would have also been taught a trade…likely the trade of his father. Tarsus was famous for the manufacturing of goat’s hair felt, which is likely why Saul learned to be a tent-maker as his trade.

My point is this…Saul was a skilled, educated man from a respected family who was born and raised in the most highly intellectually esteemed city in the Empire…he was no idiot. Not only was Saul raised on Greek philosophy, he was also raised as a Jewish Pharisee.

**Saul the Jewish Pharisee**

Though Saul was raised in a Hellenistic city in the Roman Empire, he was 100% Jewish and very proud of it. Saul says of himself in Phil 3:5 that he was “circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee…” That’s a perfect score when it comes to being a Jew! Saul’s family could trace their pure lineage back to the tribe of Benjamin, perhaps the mostly highly esteemed of the twelve tribes, so we can assume that much of Saul’s childhood included a rigorous education regarding his heritage and the sacred scriptures of their faith. Since Saul refers to himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, we can assume his religious education was all in Hebrew. In fact, when he addresses the council in Acts 22, everyone is astonished that he speaks Hebrew, even as the Roman officer in Acts 21:37 is astonished that he speaks Greek. Most of the Jews in the Roman world would have only spoken Aramaic, which is a poor man’s blend of Greek and Hebrew…Saul could speak, read and write in all three languages.

Although Saul was born and raised in Tarsus, Saul announces in Acts 22:3 that he was “brought up in this city (Jerusalem), educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God.” So Saul was no stranger to the capitol city of Israel. Based upon what he said and what we know about the ancient culture, we might assume that Saul’s father dropped him off in Jerusalem when Saul was 11 or 12 years old in order that he might become a student of the most highly esteemed Pharisee within all of the history of Israel: The infamous Rabbi Gamaliel. We’ve already met Gamaliel back in Acts 5 where Luke described him as a Pharisee held in honor by all the people. That is the understatement of the year. Gamaliel was the president of the Sanhedrin, which served as the Jewish Supreme Court. He was the grandson of the infamous Hillel who gave birth to a Rabbincal School that would

(c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
become famous under Gamaliel’s leadership. Gamaliel is perhaps the most quoted Jewish thinker of all time. He was the first to be granted the title “Rabban,” which means “master teacher.” According to the Dr. David Bridges, Gamaliel authored many reforms for the improvement of society, including regulations designed to protect the rights of women. Another scholar writes that there would have been close to 1000 students in the rabbinical school who were classmates of Saul. Another interesting note about Gamaliel…many scholars believe that Gamaliel was likely one of the teachers who engaged with the 12 year old Jesus in the temple during that time when Mary and Joseph accidentally left town without Him according to Luke 2! According to Jewish scholars, Gamaliel was famous for having his students become well versed in the writings of the Greeks as well as the Torah, and he taught his students to greet the Gentiles with “Peace be with you,” even on the heathen holidays. Again…think about how specifically God prepared Saul to become the great evangelist to the Gentiles even as a Jew of the highest order. His mentor was the smartest man in the Temple who had a soft spot in his heart for the Gentiles. Can you see God’s sovereignty at work here?

So, Saul received his education from Gamaliel; Gamaliel is the president of the Sanhedrin; and clearly Saul is a young man with great zeal and intelligence. Do you see how that helps us fill in some blanks? For instance, whenever we find Jesus, John, Peter, or Stephen being tried by the Sanhedrin, is it not fair to assume that President Gamaliel’s prized disciple, young Saul, was standing close by to his master? If so, that means that Saul would have likely seen Jesus in the flesh; he would have likely witnessed the crucifixion; he would have likely seen Peter and John flogged; he would have likely been at the trial of Stephen, and we know for a fact that he was at the stoning of Stephen and that he approved of his execution.

Do you see how the dots are now starting to connect? Saul is a prodigy. He is on the fast track to becoming one of the most highly esteemed, most powerful men in his country and in his religion. He has all the credentials, he speaks three languages, he has a thriving trade as a tent maker, he has above average intelligence, he attended the right schools, he comes from the right family, and he has religious zeal. Some Jewish scholars have even theorized that Saul would have been the natural successor to Gamaliel to take leadership over the rabbinical school in Jerusalem.

But notice…Saul has not adopted the maturity of his mentor. Gamaliel is a man of peace, patience, and thoughtfulness. Remember in Acts 5 when the Sanhedrin were so furious at Peter and John that they were planning to kill them both? Do you remember how Rabbi Gamaliel spoke prudence, wisdom, and self-control at that moment? Eventually Gamaliel convinced the Sanhedrin to let the disciples go. But what did young Saul think of that outcome?

We can almost picture the scene, can’t we? Saul is a young man with great ambitions. He is proud, intelligent, driven, and fiercely loyal to his Jewish convictions and heritage. No doubt he
is beginning to think that old man Gamaliel is losing his edge. Like most prodigies, Saul begins to believe that he is just that smart…just that right…and his arrogance grows with every compliment and admiring look from the council. Word around the temple is that Saul is the up and coming superstar…the guy you want to know and befriend if you have any hopes of sitting at the head table in a couple of years. Rest assured that the Chief Priests have taken notice of this young man as well…they see his drive, his charisma, his passion. They also see that he is ambitious to advance…he has no problem doing what needs to be done to squash this new group of Jesus followers who are causing such a ruckus. So the Chief Priests stir the pot. They include Saul in the trials; they expose Saul to the floggings; they make sure that he is standing by when Stephen gets stoned. Slowly but surely Saul’s noble religious intentions become a burning rage within him against any and all who would oppose his cause. Let’s hit the pause for a moment…this is getting intense.

How many of you like Star Wars? I am a big fan of the Star Wars movies. I’ve watched them all several times. As I was thinking about Saul, I could not help but reflect on the character of young Anikin Skywalker. If you remember your Star Wars movies, you might recall that young Anikin was a prodigy from the beginning. The “force” was strong with him even as a boy, and all throughout the earliest scenes of his life you can’t help but admire his power, his good intentions, and his relationship with his mentor, Obi One Kenobi. But then something goes terribly wrong with Anikin. His hunger for power to save his wife leads him to over to the “dark side” when he believes the lies of the evil emperor. Before long, Anikin Skywalker transforms into the dreaded Darth Vader, and that doesn’t end well.

To some extent, that’s what is happening here with Saul. Saul has great talent, great religious convictions, great intentions…but somewhere along the way Saul becomes convinced that the Christians are the enemies of God, and with a completely clean conscience, Saul takes on the role of a righteous persecutor…like so many before and since, he unleashes his own jihad against the Christians. Saul is not alone. He is commissioned by the Chief Priests with letters to pursue, arrest, and persecute any and all “followers of the Way.” And we learn in Acts 8 and again here in Acts 9 that Saul did just that. Luke writes that Saul was ravaging the church, entering house to house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison. Luke writes in 9:1 that Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus, and how his obsession with ravaging the church leads him to pursue those who have escaped Jerusalem into other cities and villages. Saul will say later of himself in Acts 22 that he “persecuted this Way to the death.” Not only did he throw people into prison, but according to Acts 26, he cast his vote to have them executed on more than one occasion.

In every sense of the word, Saul becomes a terrorist…

(c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
In our text this morning we read that Saul is now on his way to Damascus to find whatever Christians might be in that town so that he can drag them back to Jerusalem and throw them into prison. Damascus was 135 miles away from Jerusalem...hardly a threat to the Jewish Temple or the capitol city...yet Saul was obsessed. He would not rest as long as the Christian message was spreading from town to town. He was convinced that it was God’s will for him to crush these followers of the Way.

Make no mistake: Saul was one scary dude. He wasn’t just violent; he was brilliant as well. You couldn’t outsmart him; there was nowhere to hide. Saul was ruthless, without mercy, and no doubt his talent, charisma, and zeal led to many men joining him in the persecution of the Christians.

And where was God? What was God up to? How could God allow this Jewish prodigy, this young man of such promise, to become Darth Vader? How could God allow this powerful young man to wreak such pain and suffering upon innocent people who were simply trying to live peaceful lives as followers of Jesus?

These are good and difficult questions. The simple answer is that we are always free creatures who make choices, but the Bible helps us to understand that there is also a Liar who whispers to us. Saul’s story reminds us that the most subtle and dangerous lie is often whispered into the ears of those with the best intentions and the greatest promise. And we are all susceptible to hearing and agreeing with lies...all of us. Like so many throughout history, Saul believed the lie of religious indignation. Saul believed the lie that the party line was worth killing for. Saul substituted his devotion to God for his devotion to his party. He lost his first love and betrayed everything he said he stood for...there was no biblical justification for what he did. Still, Saul was convinced he was right...he was convinced that this was God’s will.

Today all over the world there are many such intelligent, well intentioned, zealous individuals who wreak terror upon the world, all the while living with absolute certainty that they are doing what is right in the eyes of god. Such is why the age old truism still applies to this day: what we believe to be true about God determines the way we live.

Saul somehow convinced himself that God sanctioned violence in order to preserve religious purity. Osama Bin Laden was convinced that God would reward unspeakable atrocities including the destruction of the World Trade Center. Now...in case you are an agnostic or an atheist and you are about to order a copy of my sermon for all your best friends, rest assured: you don’t need to believe God exists for this truism to hold...the belief that God does not exist will certainly inform your behavior as well. Atheist Communist leaders such as Stalin and Mao believed there was no god, so they felt justified in executing millions upon millions of people who believed in

(c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
God or those whom they felt were a threat. Turns out that godless terrorists are just as dangerous as religious terrorists…the profile of a terrorist always begins with what they believe to be true about God.

Now…what are we to make of this profile of a terrorist? It’s a bit depressing, and I know that some of you are thinking, “If that can happen to a brilliant, well-intentioned guy like Saul, what’s to keep that from happening to me or others around me?” That is a valid concern, and that’s why knowing and remembering history is so absolutely important. It’s also why thinking accurately about God is so critically important.

Next Sunday we will read about what comes next in this very dramatic story, but here’s the question I want you to think about leading up to next week: what did Jesus say regarding the way we should treat those who threaten us? What did Jesus say about how we are to treat our enemies? What did Jesus say about the way we are to manage ourselves in light of those who hate us, hate our religion, hate our country, hate everything about us? If we put into practice what Jesus said…do you think we might resist the lie of becoming a religious terrorist?

And should we be hostile, angry persecutors of truth…in whatever expression that might manifest itself…is there any hope for us? Are we ever too far gone to be forgiven? After all, people like Saul should be wiped out, right? God hates terrorists, right? No…

Let me close with my life verse…the verse I will quote every day of my life, and in every sermon, because it grips me every single time. In this verse we find the single greatest defense against the Lie that would lead us to become destroyers: Romans 5:8, “But God shows his love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners…while we were enemies…Christ died for us.” God loves and pursues our enemies…and we should too. Let’s pray.