



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"The Punisher"

Saul, who we know better by his Roman name, Paul, is first introduced to us as party to a stoning. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death while Saul watched the clothes of those who stoned him.

Let's read a few of the pertinent verses that depict Saul as the punisher of the church.

Acts 22:20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

Acts 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

Acts 22:4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,
Acts 22:5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.

Acts 22:19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.

Acts 26:10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

Acts 26:11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Galatians 1:13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.

In the first century a legal stoning could only be inflicted by the verdict of a regularly constituted court of twenty-three qualified members. There must be trustworthy and convincing testimony of at least two qualified eye-witnesses to the crime. The culprit must be a person of legal age and of sound mind, and the crime must be proved to have been committed of the culprit's free will and without the aid of others.

The two valid witnesses and the sentenced criminal go to the edge of a two story building. From there the two witnesses are to push the criminal off the roof. The two-story height was estimated to effect a quick and painless death but is not so high that the body will become dismembered.

After the criminal has fallen, the two witnesses were to drop a large boulder onto the criminal – requiring both of the witnesses to lift the boulder together. If the criminal did not die from the fall or from the crushing of the large boulder, then any people in the surrounding area are to quickly cause him to die by stoning with whatever rocks they can find.

Normally, then, it was the witnesses who carried out the sentence. Since some effort was involved they would take off any outer garments to make their work easier.

It would seem that the stoning of Stephen was not entirely legal but neither was it a mob action. The fact that Saul cast no stones doesn't mean he didn't consent to it; he did. By being the person who held on to the clothing of those doing the stoning it showed he was held in some regard.

When he appears in the record at Stephen's stoning, he is probably thirty or thirty-five years old, having drawn the attention of prominent Jewish men as one who can be given important responsibility. What of the years in between his education in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel and the stoning of Stephen?

All we can do is speculate. In all probability he became a rabbi and lived and taught in some local synagogue community, perhaps in his own hometown. No doubt he continued to study and learn. It is likely that he distinguished himself and began to draw attention to himself.

The stoning of Stephen was a match that ignited a fire. It gave Saul the green light to eliminate the followers of Jesus Christ. He went about his task with a cold precision.

Did he hate Christians? I think rather he loved Judaism. He understood the message of Stephen and the followers of what they called The Way to essentially undermine centuries of Jewish history and prophecy. Of course he was wrong and would come to put Judaism into perspective for us all. But for the mean time he set out to defend that which he loved the most.

I'm not excusing anything Saul did. But even he would later say, without insinuating he was any less responsible, that he had done it out of ignorance.

Just what did Saul do? As I said, he is introduced to us as the man who watched the clothes of those who stoned Stephen.

Charles Spurgeon had an amazing insight as to the symbolism of this scene. With foresight, knowing that Saul would soon be converted and become Christ's minister, he likened the clothing at Saul's feet to the mantle of Elijah falling to Elisha. You remember the story. As Elijah was taken to Heaven in the chariot of fire his mantle fell to Elisha's feet signifying he was the successor.

Of course Paul would not take up any such mantle immediately, but I think you can see that God was at work preparing him.

Right now a lot of people are concerned about who is going to take the place of Chuck Smith and what will happen to Calvary Chapel as a movement. Well, God knows what He's doing. Concerns like that are the very opposite of everything Pastor Chuck and the movement have taught us - to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Concerning Saul as a persecutor one author had this to say:

The part which he played at this time in the horrid work of persecution has, I fear, been always underrated. It is only when we collect the separate passages in which allusion is made to this sad period, it is only when we weigh the terrible significance of the expressions used, that we feel the load of remorse which must have lain upon him... 'He made havoc of' - literally, 'he was ravaging' - the church. No stronger metaphor could well have been used. It occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, but in the Septuagint and in classical Greek is applied to the wild boars which uproot a vineyard.

I don't think it's going too far to say that Saul was the driving force behind the persecution of the church. Once he was converted Acts 9:31 tells us "then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."

Many of the verses we read in Acts and elsewhere specifically say Saul persecuted the believers. They use personal pronouns "I" and "he" to refer to Saul. This was his mission.

Punishments were administered by the synagogues (Acts 22:19; 26:11), which often took the form of lashings, imprisonments (8:3; 22:4; 26:10), and even death (9:1; 22:4; 26:10). Saul was determined to compel the followers of Jesus to “blaspheme” (26:11), that is, “to call Jesus accursed.”

At least one biographer suggests that some of these killings may have been carried out by Jewish zealots working with Saul called the *sicarii*. The name means *dagger-men*. Under their cloaks they concealed *sicae*, or small daggers, from which they received their name. At popular assemblies, particularly during the pilgrimage to the Temple Mount, they stabbed their enemies (Romans or Roman sympathizers, Herodians, and wealthy Jews comfortable with Roman rule) blending into the crowd to escape detection.

In Acts 26:10 the phrase "put to death," referring to certain believers, is literally "sentenced to death." The Jews had no power to carry-out the death penalty. Yet here was Saul murdering some believers and executing the death penalty on others. It has been suggested that Pontius Pilate was content to look the other way as a political favor to the Sanhedrin.

We can't say in every case but we can say in most cases that as these believers were flogged or imprisoned or murdered or executed that **they replicated the final moments of Stephen when he died.**

Acts 7:55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,
Acts 7:56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Acts 7:59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Acts 7:60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Think of how many triumphant deaths Saul witnessed as he went about persecuting the church. They seemed only to harden him, to make him more resolved to kill others. But we know that Jesus was able to use each of them to reveal to Saul the power of a saved life.

When Saul did meet Jesus Christ, on the road to Damascus to kill more Christians, the Lord said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **Me**?" (Acts 9:4).

Jesus understands what happens to you as happening to Him. In another passage He will tell those who survive the Tribulation that when they did or did not do something to the least of His followers, they did or did not do it unto Him.

I don't want to confuse trials with persecutions; they are very different. Generally speaking, however, whenever something happens in my life that I would put in the category of being 'bad,' my first thought is almost always, "Why is this happening to me?"

Though it is a thought, it's really a question I am asking the Lord. "Lord, why is this happening to me?"

There is an implied distance in the thought, in the question. I am implying that God is either causing or permitting something to happen to me while He watches from a safe and uninvolved distance. I'm pretty sure it will all work together for good in the end, but initially and along the way I wonder where is God when it hurts.

What if I took Jesus' words seriously and believed that, for example, if I am being persecuted it is really the Lord that is being persecuted?

Well that would revolutionize my whole way of thinking! Then I might really be empowered to look upon my persecutors the way Stephen did - with compassion, asking the Lord to forgive them. I wouldn't wonder at all why I was being treated badly; I might even expect it.

When Stephen was stoned they were really stoning the Lord. He understood that and it set the tone for his boldness in life and for his triumph at death.

Bold living and triumphant dying can be ours, too, if we understand and embrace that Jesus loves us so much He has identified with us in our persecutions.

If I, or you, are asking, "Why?," it implies you feel the Lord is distant. He's not!