

# Saul of Tarsus - Good Heart Wrong Head

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## Summing Up The Life of Saul

This year, articles in the *Day Star* have focused on Bible characters whose experiences have significant end time parallels. I believe the Great Tribulation is near and feel it is a good time to consider Bible men and women known for their courage and faith. These stories provide helpful insights and prepare us for what lies ahead.

This month, we will examine the life of the Apostle Paul because there are certain aspects in his life that have important end time parallels. To summarize the life of Saul before his conversion into a single sound bite, I would say "good heart, wrong head."

If I were to sum up the life of Saul after conversion, I would say, "whole heart, right head." The story of Saul's transformation has dimensions that every Christian should consider because a complete paradigm shift is no small thing.

## Saul As a Child

Bible students know few facts about Saul's childhood. Most scholars believe that he was born about A.D. 12 in the coastal city of Tarsus. Tarsus was near the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea at a location about 250 miles southeast of where Ankara, Turkey is today.

Saul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe well known for its fierce and zealous devotion. (Genesis 49:27; Judges 20:15,16) Saul's parents may have named him after the first king of Israel, who was also a descendent from the tribe of Benjamin.

Because Pompey made Tarsus the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia in 67 B.C., Saul came into this world having two identities: He was a Jew by nationality, but he was also a Roman citizen. This unique combination ultimately enabled Paul to travel and speak for God in places and languages that few people could have done at that time.

As a city, Tarsus was noted for its advanced schools, including a respected school in Stoic philosophy. The pride of Tarsus was its academic prowess and this son of Tarsus was no embarrassment.

As a young man, Saul decided to serve God as a rabbi. His passion for learning was as great as his ability to absorb and comprehend. As a lad, Saul probably traveled to Jerusalem with his father for the appointed feasts. It must have been an awe inspiring treat for young Saul to see the grandeur of the temple and the fascinating services the priests conducted.

Perhaps it was these events that inspired Saul to dedicate himself to God's service. Saul was not a Levite, so he could not become a priest, however, he could do the next best thing and

become a member of the Pharisee party.

After completing studies in Tarsus, he was accepted into the school taught by the Pharisee scholars in Jerusalem. There, he studied under the famous teacher, Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3) I believe Saul was about 18 when he arrived in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus had ascended to Heaven in A.D. 30.

Saul was deeply passionate about his religion and being accustomed to a life of self denial, he paid careful attention to right doing. Saul was totally committed to becoming a Pharisee.

He was a zealot in every detail; energetic, intense and ideological. He was an exemplary student, and because he was intellectually superior, his teachers were confident this young man would have a bright future within their ranks. It has been said that "love is blind."

If this is so, then Saul's love for his religion led him to be totally convinced of the inerrancy of the Pharisaical doctrines and the righteousness of his ways. Years later he wrote, ". . . **If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.**" (Philippians 3:4-6)

## Religious Parties of Israel

In Saul's day, Israel consisted of several religious sects (or denominations) much like Protestantism today. This diversity is important to remember because the city of Jerusalem did not house one nation living in religious unity and harmony. Tensions between various sects were openly hostile and militant toward each other at times.

Constant friction made it difficult for Rome to govern Jerusalem. Because Jerusalem was a city of *relatives* having competing views about God, it was a contentious place in which to live. No doubt this caustic environment was one reason why John the Baptist conducted his meetings in the desert.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem for advanced schooling, two religious parties dominated the scene. As you might expect, these two parties represented the liberals and the conservatives. The Pharisee party, to which Saul had pledged himself, was known for its pious commitment to righteousness through austerity and rigor.

As conservatives, they were zealous for righteous living and were quick to condemn anyone who violated *their* rules of righteousness. (Mark 2) They believed righteousness was of utmost importance because they thought unrighteous people could not receive eternal life. Therefore, the Pharisees were constantly codifying righteousness by defining rules for every aspect of life. For example, when it came to Sabbath observance, the Pharisees had codified more than 400 rules for proper Sabbath observance.

*The Pharisees were convinced that life in the hereafter was only possible through rigorous obedience to God's laws. Their winning argument was: "Would God grant eternal life to a sinner who chose to live in ignorance and defiance to His laws?" Because Israel had a long history of apostasy, the Pharisees "reasoned" that using a heavy legalistic doctrine would "help" the Jews prevent apostasy from occurring again. (Matthew 23) It is ironic that the greatest fear of the Pharisees was apostasy.*

The religion of the Pharisees required conformity to rules rather than purity of heart. (Matthew 3:7-10) To them, a zeal for conformity was the evidence of a "new heart" mentioned by Ezekiel. (Ezekiel 18:31; Jeremiah 31:33) The Pharisees loved religion; it was their God.

They believed that if a "righteous person" happened to have any "unknown" sin in his life, the righteousness of Abraham, their father, covered any deficit. (Genesis 15:6; Luke 3:8) Perhaps Saul was attracted to the Pharisees because like himself, they were dogmatic and their thirst for advanced education was insatiable. (John 5:39,40; 2 Timothy 3:7)

The Pharisees considered the Old Testament, plus the writings and traditions of the rabbis to be the "Word of God." Therefore, the Pharisees staunchly defended the traditions and orthodoxy of Judaism more aggressively than any other party in Israel.

The other leading party of the time, the Sadducees, was also legalistic and politically powerful, but in a different way than the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in a hereafter. Consequently, they were self-indulgent and focused on obtaining wealth, pleasure, status and comfort.

Even more, they rejected all but the first five books of the Old Testament. The Sadducees were legalistic pragmatists. For example, they saw nothing wrong with hiring Gentiles to work for them on Sabbath, as long as none of the Gentiles lived within their gates. (Exodus 20:10) The Sadducees despised the austere lifestyle of the Pharisees and they constantly argued with them over theological differences. Overall, it seemed that the Sadducees held control of Israel politically, while the the Pharisees held control over the people religiously.

## **A.D. 30 - Christianity Begins to Grow**

Before we examine Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, we need to highlight developments that happened in Jerusalem while Saul was attending school. After the apostles baptized 3,000 believers into the kingdom of God on that great day of Pentecost in A.D. 30, the Christian movement in Jerusalem began to expand rapidly.

Over the next four years, various disciples of Jesus were publicly humiliated and punished for promoting what was considered an inflammatory religion that was highly critical of Jewish leaders and the teachings of Judaism. As is so often the case, the more Jewish leaders persecuted the disciples of Jesus, the more popular they became!

The Bible says, **"The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the**

**people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade** [in the temple complex]." (Acts 5:12, insertion mine) Proselytizing in the temple and healing the sick on the streets produced a large number of converts. As Christianity grew in popularity in Jerusalem, the Sadducees became highly agitated. Their political support was eroding.

The Pharisees were also alarmed because people called them enemies of God. The Christian movement was different than anything Jewish leaders had ever seen before. The disciples of Jesus were performing *genuine* miracles daily, just like Jesus had done! People who had suffered from lifelong illness were being healed, right before the eyes of people who were intimately acquainted with their illness.

These wonderful and joyous manifestations of divine power were the talk of the town and crowds flocked to hear and see what the disciples of Jesus were doing and saying.

". . . People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed." - (Acts 5:15,16)

Boldly, Peter and the disciples spoke and performed miracles and Jewish authorities could not rebuff them. Christians were teaching salvation through belief in Jesus Christ.

They were preaching to the Jewish people that Jesus was man's High Priest and that temple rituals were no longer necessary. The Christians exclaimed that Pharisees and Sadducees had slain the Lamb of God! Over the course of time, the Pharisees and the Sadducees held several meetings to discuss proposals that would shut down the growth of Christianity. Christian doctrine and influence was threatening the survival of Judaism and something had to be done.

## **The Sanhedrin in Israel**

The Sanhedrin was Israel's highest court. The 71 members of the Sanhedrin came from all religious parties according to election and/or bribery. The Romans granted the Jews (and other similar tribal nations) a limited amount of civil power to deal with their own people. As far as the Romans were concerned, tribal nations were allowed to impose their cultural laws as long as they stayed within the higher laws of Rome.

Granting this type of authority freed the Romans from the onerous chore of passing judgment on meaningless and disputable matters like religion. However, there was one law above all others that Rome imposed on all tribal nations. The Romans made it clear that tribal nations did not have the power to punish *any* Roman citizen. Every Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar.

You may recall that after Peter denied being a follower of Jesus in Pilate's judgment hall early Friday morning before the crucifixion, Peter's remorse and broken spirit allowed him to have a "born again" conversion that weekend. (John 21:15-19) The Lord restored Peter's credibility

among the disciples by empowering him with enormous Holy Spirit power. Thus, it was Peter who boldly led the way at Pentecost when 3,000 souls were baptized.

Later on, God used Peter again in a powerful way when the Holy Spirit revealed to him the deceptions of Ananias and Sapphira. Their sudden death had a profound impact on the early church. (Acts 5) For all his faults and weaknesses, Peter had certain qualities the Lord could use, but only *after* Peter was converted. Peter became bold in God's grace and strength, no longer depending on his own arms of flesh. Peter was a "black and white" kind of a guy, leaving no gray areas in his mind.

He did not mince words about the atrocities of Jewish leaders, especially when telling the Jews about the murder of Jesus. Peter's boldness had a price for which he was arrested and imprisoned, but an angel miraculously freed him from the chains of his captors during the night. A few days later, Peter rallied the apostles and they went out on the streets of Jerusalem again. No human can thwart this kind of determination and power.

When the Sanhedrin heard that Peter was out of prison and that he and the apostles were healing the sick on the streets of Jerusalem *again*, they immediately sent a captain and soldiers for him. Notice what the Bible says, **"At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.' Peter and the other apostles replied [in never-to-be-forgotten words]: 'We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.' When they heard this, they [members of the Sanhedrin] were furious and wanted to put them to death."** (Acts 5:26-33, insertions mine)

The Bible record continues: **"But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: 'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.'**" (Acts 5:34-39)

The wisdom of Gamaliel is legendary for good reason. No wonder Saul wanted to sit at his feet. The words and influence of Gamaliel during this meeting brings up a very important point. Consider this: For centuries, Christians have viewed the Pharisees with a certain amount of

contempt.

This contempt rises from the New Testament. Christians believe that Jesus is "God in the flesh." They find the Pharisees and the Sadducees to be so blinded by their religious dogma that they cannot even see that Jesus is the Messiah. Consequently, a certain amount of contempt has been held down through the centuries for those who participated in Christ's death. But is this Christian contempt for the Jews appropriately placed? Consider this:

## Confrontation

Jesus came to Earth at God's appointed time. His birth was not a random event. The timing of Jesus' birth and ministry on Earth was *predetermined* so that Jesus could challenge the finest religious system that *man* could produce. (Galatians 4:4) God wanted to demonstrate the reaction and behavior of the world's best religious system when confronted with truth. *In other words, the contest between Jesus and the Pharisees is a parallel of Jesus versus any religious system!*

This is an end time parallel that everyone should consider. Some of the Pharisees, like Gamaliel, were sincere and devout. The Jewish people respected them because they were dedicated to selfless sacrifice for the service of God. The Pharisee party was horribly misguided, but Gamaliel was not an evil man.

He was a spiritual man, a good man in a religious system that co-mingled the doctrines of men with the truth of God. (Mark 7:7) As a Pharisee, Gamaliel had a "good heart" but a "wrong head" when it came to understanding the fulfillment of Scripture. His comments prove that he wondered in his heart if Jesus might be the Messiah.

A Christian cannot appreciate the contest between Jesus and the Pharisees until he/she also discovers that he/she actually suffers from the same problems that afflicted the Pharisees. A blind man cannot see. A blind man cannot see what he should see unless, (a) there is someone to open his eyes, and (b) he is willing to open his eyes. When people are blinded by the certainty of their own religious dogma, they cannot see or understand their own blindness! This is a problem that every human being must wrestle with.

The Pharisees were convinced they were right and everyone else was wrong. Jesus came into their world and spoke truth. The result was a deadly confrontation. Here is a profound thought: Our ability to understand truth is proportional to our willingness to consider truth. We cannot mature in an understanding of truth unless we are willing to submit to what we have learned. We cannot enjoy the freedom and joy of truth until we come to a place in life where we decide to follow truth – no matter what it is, or what it costs.

## The Pharisee Test

There are some pharisaical ways in every human being. Here is a short test that demonstrates this. The Pharisees hated Jesus for three reasons: First, Jesus did not show reverence for the

ideas they respected.

Jesus insulted their piety, their culture, their ideas about salvation and their overall view of God. (If Jesus came into *your* church and did this to *you*, how would you react?) Second, Jesus embarrassed the Pharisees by condemning them with their own words.

Jesus caused people to have less respect for the Pharisees with each episode of embarrassment. Jesus continually demonstrated how the religion of the Pharisees was driven by vanity. (If Jesus embarrassed your church leaders every time they made a religious statement, how would you feel?)

Third, Jesus performed miracles every day to back up His outrageous claims. Since the Pharisees could not perform miracles, Jesus' actions further humiliated the Pharisees in the eyes of the people by proving they were spiritually devoid of God's power. (What would your church leaders do with a miracle working person in their midst who taught a strange and different doctrine?)

To be confronted with God and His truth is not a casual experience. During the Great Tribulation, the confronting presence of truth will push every person into either defiant rebellion or complete submission. There will be no middle ground. Jesus told His disciples, "**For whoever is not against us is for us.**" (Mark 9:40)

## "The Way"

This bold, new Christian belief system threatened the culture and traditional ways of the Jews, so the Pharisees and Sadducees united against a common enemy called "The Way." The Christian movement was initially called "The Way" because Jesus said, ". . . ***I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***" (John 14:6, italics mine) **Note:** As time passed, members of "The Way" became known as "Christians." (Acts 11:26)

During the first four years of Christian growth in Jerusalem, Saul was a graduate student in the school of the Pharisees. As tensions mounted between Jews and Christians, young Saul, a zealous ideologue, came to despise Christians because their actions were tearing down the very institution to which he has dedicated his life.

By the end of A.D. 33, the Sanhedrin was forced to ignore Gamaliel's words. The Sanhedrin finally concluded that the death penalty must be administered to all dissidents belonging to "The Way" or chaos would ultimately bring the wrath of Rome down upon Jerusalem. (The Romans required tribal nations to keep peace in their cities.

If a civil disturbance required the presence and services of the Roman army, the Romans would destroy the entire city. Total destruction was Rome's way. This action prevented many problems from reappearing in the future. Of course, loot from the city was then used to pay Rome's mercenary soldiers.)

## Dealing with Dissidence

Every group of people, whether it be religious or political, faces dissidence at some point in time. If the group does not remove *defiant* dissidents, division and dissipation will ultimately occur. Because Christians chose to defy the demands of the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin was forced to punish Christians.

They had no option but to destroy the apostles and their followers to protect their religion and their city! There is a powerful end time parallel here. During the Great Tribulation, religious and political leaders will unite and attempt to destroy the opposition created by God's servants.

## A Divine Authority

Deuteronomy 13 contains the directions God gave to Moses for dealing with dissident behavior. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part concerns false prophets and the second part concerns misguided leaders or laymen.

The Sanhedrin used Deuteronomy 13 to justify their execution of Jesus and later, they justified their persecution of the apostles with this same chapter. There is also an end time parallel here. During the Great Tribulation, God will confront the great religions of the world with His truth.

These institutions will not be able to accept His truth, without destroying what they stand for, any more than the Pharisees were able to accept the teachings of Jesus. Further, God will confront the governments of the world with His laws and the governments of the world will not be able to deal with the will of the Almighty within the limits of their constitutions. Confrontation and consternation will face everyone.

When Jesus came to Earth the first time, He came to confront with His truth the best religion and the strongest government the world had ever seen. (Matthew 10:34) Neither could accommodate Jesus, but there were individuals within these entities who received Him as their Savior.

To these believers, He gave the privilege of being called "children of God." (John 1:12) Just before Jesus appears the second time, the same will be true again. This world and its organizations cannot receive Christ. He is alien. His gospel and His ways are different. His truth and His law stand in opposition to the religions and governments of men. For Jesus to have complete dominion, men must let go of their power and this loss will not come without a great struggle. However, people who do choose who receive Him will be called the "children of God."

## Deuteronomy 13, – Part I - – Prophets

Notice God's instructions to Moses in Deuteronomy 13: **"If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the**



words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you. If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods' (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. Stone him to death, because he tried to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again. (Deuteronomy 13:1-11)

## Deuteronomy 13, – Part II – Any Rise of New Doctrine

"If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in that wicked men have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods' (gods you have not known), then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town.

Destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock. Gather all the plunder of the town into the middle of the public square and completely burn the town and all its plunder as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It is to remain a ruin forever, never to be rebuilt.

None of those condemned things shall be found in your hands, so that the Lord will turn from his fierce anger; he will show you mercy, have compassion on you, and increase your numbers, as he promised on oath to your forefathers, because you obey the Lord your God, keeping all his commands that I am giving you today and doing what is right in his eyes." (Deuteronomy 13:12-18)

Some people today read these and other verses within the Old Testament and conclude that the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament! In fact, people often present verses like these to demonstrate that the Old Testament had to be nailed to the cross.

However, it is important to remember that these words *were given and meant to be applied* within the context of a theocracy – that is, during the time when God Himself ruled over Israel. God gave these instructions to Moses because no other gods would be tolerated as long as He ruled over Israel! Therefore, any deviation or allegiance to another god was an act of defiance against Jehovah. In this setting, it is understandable that total destruction was the only solution for open defiance against God.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees in Saul's day presumed they were operating under the principles of a theocracy and they justified their actions toward the Christians with Scripture! The Jews thought they were doing God a service when they persecuted the Christians! (John 16:1-3)

## Summary of Saul's Environment

This was the world Saul knew as a young man. The explosive growth of Christianity in Jerusalem became the focal point for increasing frustration of the Sanhedrin. Consequently, the Sanhedrin used Deuteronomy 13 as a basis for divine authority (or so they thought) when dealing with dissident Christians. As the drama unfolds, keep in mind the year is A.D. 34 and Saul has just graduated from the school of the Pharisees. . . .

## Stephen Condemned and Stoned

"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith [and disobedient to teachings of the Pharisees]. **Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.' So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law [the Pharisees]. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [Matthew 24:2] and change the customs [the ceremonial system which] Moses handed down to us.'** All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these charges true?' " (Acts 6:7-7:1, insertions mine)

The members of the Sanhedrin were well acquainted with the disciples of Jesus, but Stephen was a new face. I believe this incident occurred in the Spring of A.D. 34 during the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Jews from distant places like Cyrene, Alexandria Egypt, the province of Cilicia and various places in Asia had gathered in Jerusalem because of the required attendance for all Jews during Passover. (Exodus 34:24) In addition to this, the seventy weeks of Daniel 9 ended just 15 days earlier with the close of A.D. 33.

Somehow, Stephen and some of the visiting Jews became engaged in an aggressive religious discussion. When the Jews could not defeat the logic Stephen used from the Old Testament prophecies, they secretly schemed to have him arrested for dissension. When called before the Sanhedrin, Stephen was anxious to present Jesus to the leaders of Israel. Stephen explained why Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple by reviewing why the temple was necessary in the first place.

He started with the call of Abraham, then the call of Moses and then the building of the temple by Solomon. (Acts 7:2-50) I believe Stephen was leading up to the point that Solomon's temple was only a temporary edifice until Messiah appeared. At that point, Messiah would be the temple and the focus of worship, instead of a physical edifice. (See Revelation 21:22.)

Therefore, the destruction of the temple was appropriate because (a) bricks and mortar cannot house a God as great and majestic as Jehovah, and (b) Messiah had appeared. To underscore his point, Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1,2, **"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?"** (Acts 7:49,50)

Suddenly, Stephen stopped. He looked around at the 71 members of the Sanhedrin as the power and presence of the Holy Spirit came over him. Stephen was shown that his argument was useless, falling on deaf ears. He knew his death was imminent. The Holy Spirit gave Stephen words and the Spirit pronounced blood guilt upon Israel.

**" 'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.' When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."** (Acts 7:51-58)

## **Saul Persecutes The Church**

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was the first victim of an earlier decision the Sanhedrin had made to destroy all of the members of "The Way." Saul was an observer in the courtroom when Stephen was tried. No doubt Saul was gratified to see Stephen die, because he agreed with the Sanhedrin that all Christians had to be destroyed or they would destroy Judaism. As members of the Sanhedrin began to shed their cloaks to stone Stephen, young Saul saw an opportunity to be of service. He volunteered to hold the garments of the executioners – as I am sure he relished the excitement of killing a Christian dissident.

"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him." (Acts 7:59-8:2)

It is understandable that at that moment, Saul's heart was not touched by the death of Stephen.

Saul regarded Stephen as a defiant dissident. For just such occasions, Jesus warned His disciples about the blindness of religion, "**They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.**" (John 16:2-4)

Yet in Saul's mind, Deuteronomy 13 left no doubt that the Sanhedrin was doing the will of God. The stoning of Stephen was the fulfillment of what God required.

Saul seized the moment and used the destruction of Christians as a way to quickly advance himself within the Pharisee party. He volunteered to ferret out Christians and bring them before the Sanhedrin. The authorities were quite pleased that this young man was so willing to do the "dirty work."

Saul was an ideologue (a person who follows an ideology in a dogmatic way without compromise), and was perfectly suited to implement Deuteronomy 13 to the letter of the law. The religious leaders gave Saul the necessary permits (to satisfy the Romans if anyone should care to ask) and the Bible says, ". . . **Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.**" (Acts 8:3,4)

As a person might expect, the name, "Saul of Tarsus," quickly became infamous among Christians. Saul was fresh out of graduate school. He was bright, and on a fast-track as far as his career in the party was concerned. He was devoted to legalism – always observing the letter of the law. He was so motivated, that the suffering he inflicted on Christians did not bother him. He was willing to do what it took to save Judaism and his tireless actions made him perfect for the job.

Here is another end time parallel. During the Great Tribulation, many good people will commit the same kind of atrocities that Saul did, thinking they are doing a service for God. This parallel is important to understand, because when Stephen fell to his knees, he prayed, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" I find it interesting that these are among the final words of Jesus! ". . . **Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**" (Luke 23:34)

Why did Jesus and Stephen say these words when confronting death? I find one answer. When God steps into the affairs of man, there is confrontation. Truth meets blindness, but blindness does not know that it has confronted truth. Human ignorance and arrogance are such that a person with a good heart can do things that are offensive to God. "Good heart, wrong head." Both Jesus and Stephen knew there were a few good people who were sitting in judgment against them.

They also knew that if people, like Gamaliel, who had honest hearts, could understand God's truth as they understood it, they would not be assaulting them. Instead, they would be standing with them. Therefore, both men expressed love for their enemies. They asked God to overlook the ignorance of their enemies because among their enemies they knew there were people with

good hearts. Bible history proves that Saul was one such person!

## Saul Meets Jesus

The more Saul chased the Christians throughout Jerusalem, the more the gospel spread as they fled for their lives! Eventually, Saul heard there were a significant number of Christians causing the same kind of problems in Damascus, so ". . . **He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'** The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything." (Acts 9:1-9)

Saul was traveling to Damascus, intent on persecuting more Christians, when Jesus intercepted the young man by knocking him to the ground with a brilliant flash of light. After that brief encounter, Saul was left in a state of shock and totally blind.

He did not know what to think or do. For the first time in his short but intense life, everything that Saul believed in, everything that he had studied, everything that he loved was suspect. Instead of the bright, self-directing, self-important and self-assured young Pharisee with a bright future ahead, Saul was blind and totally confused. All he could think as he stumbled toward Damascus was, "So, Jesus Christ is God!" Saul arrived in Damascus in a very humble state, humiliated beyond words, and confused.

Saul had come to Damascus to take Christians captive, but he arrived a prisoner of blindness. Saul was blind in more ways than one and for the first time in his life, he saw his blindness – a rare experience for anyone.

## The Lights Come On

"In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, 'Ananias!' 'Yes, Lord,' he answered. The Lord told him, 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.' 'Lord,' Ananias answered, 'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.

And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.' But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must

suffer for my name.'

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus." (Acts 9:10-19)

The sincere words of Ananias touch my heart. He approached the young man and said kindly, "Brother Saul." Let me ask you, what do you call your enemy? How do you address those who would do you harm? How do you respond to those who want to hurt you? Yet, Ananias said, "Brother Saul."

The most amazing feature of true Christianity is the principle of "love your enemies." Nothing reveals the presence and power of God within a human being like the spirit of forgiveness. When a Christian holds no malice or hardness toward an adversary, the love of God radiates from that life. **"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."** (1 John 4:12)

Saul had spent most of his life in school, preparing himself to be a Pharisee of the Pharisees. Now that he was in Damascus, Saul entered the first grade for a second time. This time he was studying Jesus instead of religion. Once his eyes were opened and his ears able to hear, Saul's new teachers were the ridiculed and *uneducated* disciples of Jesus.

## **Saul the Evangelist**

After spending a week or two with the disciples, Saul was able to quickly align key elements from his formal education with his new spiritual eye sight and presto! Saul began to see that Jesus was the fulfillment of everything promised in the Old Testament.

The young man was so excited he could not contain himself. Remember, all along he had a good heart, but his head was filled with wrong ideas. Now that Saul realized his blindness, his head could be directed toward truth. True to form, Saul was immediately ready to tell the whole world about Jesus! This is the amazing thing about people who are ideologues by nature. They are wholehearted and enthusiastic in everything they do. The Bible says of Saul:

"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After many days had gone by [about three years], **the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city**

**gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall." (Acts 9:20-25, insertion mine)**

When the persecutor becomes the persecuted, it is apparent that an amazing change has taken place. Saul did not return to Jerusalem immediately after his conversion. The Holy Spirit called him to spend time in the solitude of the desert. Saul had much to unlearn, but he also had much to learn. He shared this experience with the Galatians because he wanted them to know that his understanding of the gospel came directly from Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

**He wrote, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into [the desert of] Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days." (Galatians 1:13-18, insertion mine)**

Three years after leaving for Damascus, Saul returned to Jerusalem. Since there had not been any news about him and his whereabouts for such a long time, the disciples were not sure what he was up to. **"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." (Acts 9: 26-31)**

## Summary

The limits of space do not allow me to present the marvelous life of Saul beyond this point. Therefore, I will close with a review of some of the end time parallels that can be found in Saul's life:

1. - During the Great Tribulation, the religious leaders of the world will parallel the behavior of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Conservatives, like the Pharisees of old, will insist that the only way to appease God so that His judgments might stop is by rigorous obedience. The problem is that their idea of how to appease God will be faulty. There is an obedience that stems from legalism (the carnal heart) and there is an obedience that springs from faith (the spiritual heart).

The question is not whether God requires obedience, the question is whether our obedience springs from faith and love! Liberals, like the Sadducees of old, will use their political connections and influence civil powers to produce legislation that attempts to control and thwart the 144,000. As in Paul's day, when Pharisees and Sadducees united against the apostles and early Christians, so in the end times, conservatives and liberals will unite against the testimony of God's 144,000 and end time Christians.

2. - After Jesus went to Heaven, He gave His disciples two great powers. First, He gave them words and wisdom to speak for God. Jesus promised, "**But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.**" (Matthew 10:19,20) Second, He gave the disciples Holy Spirit power and enabled them to perform hundreds of genuine miracles.

Jesus promised, "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth.**" (Acts 1:8) God granted them miracle working powers so that people would listen to the testimony of the disciples, believe, be "born again," and then spread the message abroad. These two gifts rested upon Paul and Barnabas as well. "**So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there [Iconium], speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.**" (Acts 14:3, insertion mine)

This same process will happen again. God will give His 144,000 servants words and wisdom to speak for Him. They will clearly present the terms and conditions of salvation from the Scriptures and the power of the Holy Spirit will rest upon them, enabling them to perform *genuine* miracles on demand. These two gifts are described in Revelation 11 as the Two Witnesses.

3. - The love of religion is blinding, so it is impossible for one man to prove the superiority of his religion over that of another. A devout Christian cannot *prove* to a devout Jew that his or her religion is superior to Judaism. History confirms this. Jesus could not *prove* to the Jews that He was Messiah! Jesus could not prove to His disciples that He was Messiah, either! One day, Jesus asked Peter if he believed that He was the Son of God and Peter responded "Yes." Jesus then said, "**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven.**" (Matthew 16:17)

Given the onerous power of religion, let me ask – what were the chances of young Saul abandoning Judaism and accepting Christianity after listening to Stephen's testimony? Zero. In fact, Saul was so convinced of the accuracy of his religious position that miracles and reasoning from Scripture could not make a dent in his thinking. The same was true of the Pharisees and Sadducees during the days of Jesus. They saw Jesus perform miracles with their own eyes and the evidence of His work was everywhere.

Yet, the only thing they could say was ". . . **By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.**" (Luke 11:15) During the Great Tribulation, God will tear down the walls



of religion with a marvelous display of power and *open* the eyes of everyone on Earth to truth for a short time. God will confront humankind with powerful manifestations of truth and power. He will force everyone to make a decision for truth or against truth.

The honest in heart, like Saul, will see the light – discover their blindness and rejoice! People who love religion and power, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, will align themselves with darkness to survive, but will forfeit eternal life. The experience of Saul on the road to Damascus has an end time parallel. Many people on Earth have honest hearts, but wrong heads. At the appointed time, God will allow everyone to see the light. All who receive the truth, like Saul, will be found among that greater number of saints when they go marching in.

4. - The Bible does not tell us how or when Saul's name was changed to Paul. Luke simply identifies Saul as the one who is also called Paul. **"Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?'"** (Acts 13:9,10)

I can almost hear the Apostle Paul saying these words – given the fact that he, too, perverted the right ways of the Lord! Although it does not really matter how Saul became known as Paul, I have a possible explanation for you to consider. When the Lord informed Saul that he would become an apostle to the Gentiles, (1 Timothy 2:7) I conclude that Saul converted his Jewish name to a Gentile equivalent, so they would accept him more readily. (The Jews were intensely hated throughout the Roman Empire and very few Gentiles would listen to a despised Jew. See Acts 16:20.)

Even more, a new identity reflects a new life. (Saul abandoned the Pharisees and I am sure the feeling was mutual.) The Apostle Paul had one objective. He wanted everyone to know Christ and the joy of His salvation. He wrote the following: **"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those [Gentiles] not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."** (1 Corinthians 9:12-23, insertion mine)

History says that Paul was executed in Rome around A.D. 65 for refusing to worship Caesar. He fought a good fight and he was faithful to the end. (2 Timothy 4:7) After studying Paul's writings and his life of service for the Lord Jesus Christ, I am forever indebted to this zealous man for showing me many wonderful things about Jesus. Jesus halted Saul on the road to Damascus because he was totally dedicated to the service of God (albeit, misdirected).

What is so wonderful about God is that He sees the heart! He knew that once Saul met Jesus, his life would be forever changed. Paul wrote 14 of the 27 books found in the New Testament! Where would Christians be without his contribution to the Bible? Paul's life is a perfect example

of a complete paradigm shift.

What he used to love, he came to hate and what he used to hate, he came to love. **"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them [my losses] rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."** (Philippians 3:7-9, insertion mine) May God help each of us to emulate the integrity, love, humility and dedication demonstrated in the life of a dear saint who became known as Paul.