

SEEING THE LIGHT

how to prepare your heart for learning and sharing the gospel

Lesson 2

PAUL SAW THAT PEOPLE SHOULD LOVE PEOPLE INSTEAD OF HURT THEM.

As we noted last week, the Bible records the conversion of Saul to Christ three times (Acts 9, 22, 26). The first record is Luke telling the story of what happened to Saul of Tarsus. And in the latter two, it is Paul retelling the event from his perspective and in his words. It is not as if there are disparities between the two that do not have an easy solution. Instead, all of them give insight into what Paul knew he went through to see finally the light of the gospel, to believe and to obey the Lord, and become the disciple and Apostle of Christ that we know of him.

In the Acts 9 account, Luke says that he was coming to Damascus “still breathing threats and murder” (9:1). Before the Sanhedrin Paul pragmatically described his actions as “persecuting this Way to death” (22:4). But when he speaks to Agrippa, for whatever reason, Paul speaks clearly what was happening inside of him. He said he “thought to myself” to do many hostile things to Christians (26:9). He added that he “locked up many” and “cast his vote” against Christians so that they would be killed. He “punished” them; He “forced them to blaspheme.” And then, as we noted last lesson, he was “furiously enraged” at them (26:9-11).

This self-disclosure by Paul is translated in the KJV as “being exceedingly mad” at them. He says he did all he could to compel them to renounce their faith in Christ – which he acknowledges was prompted by something ungodly where he “forced them” against their will and further confesses that he was “furiously enraged” (NASB) or in a “raging fury” (ESV) (c.f.. Acts 6:11). If he could not kill them, his raging fury could, at least, force them to recant (cf. Acts 9:1; Gal. 1:13–14). What “filled” Paul (i.e. his anger that manifested as hate) also controlled him (so that he pursued Christians even to Gentile cities).

MacArthur writes, “This verb is used only here and gives us a striking picture of the intensity of Paul's emotional state regarding the Jews who had converted to Christianity. You can almost picture his nostrils flaring, neck veins bulging and face beet red! The picture is a person who is so enraged they appear to be out of their mind!” It is amazing given the word fury with its intrinsic meaning that he would add an adverb that says his rage “was more than you could count!” I am not sure he could have painted a much more striking picture of his anger! In the BDAG, it is defined that he was “filled with such anger that one appears to be mad.”

So, in these dark moments in his heart, what helped Paul see the light of the gospel? By the time of Saul's conversion, the heart within Judaism's leaders were corrupt. Even in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says that those who “love” that they could not “hate” (Matthew 6:43-48). These religious leaders' “zeal” had grown into violence against Christians. Even in the Maccabean period, there were many examples of violence purported in the name of religion. But when Christians were arrested (Acts 4:3; 5:18), it was not because they had brought violence upon others. Yet, murderous plots were still contemplated against these peace loving people (5:33). Stephen was brought up on false charges and stoned by an angry mob (Acts 7:58–60). There was a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Christians were chased from city to city (Acts 9:1–2).

And Saul joined in wholeheartedly. He gave his consent to the murder of Stephen and others (Acts 7:58; 26:10). He breathed out “threatenings and slaughter” against the disciples and “made havoc of the

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church” (Acts 9:1; 8:3). He dragged Christians—men and women—to prison. He punished them often in synagogues.

During his three days in darkness, Saul/Paul came to see that his violent life in his past as a Pharisee was wrong. It was wrong because Jesus was indeed the Messiah that he had previously denied. But now he has learned to love as the Messiah.

1. **He should love people, not hate them** (Jn 13:34–35).
2. **He should help them, not hurt them** (Gal 6:10).
3. **He should free them, not incarcerate them** (Lk 4:18).

Once Saul became a Christian, there is no record that he ever lifted a finger against those of any other religion – even His own Jewish brothers – and even against those who sought to cause Him harm (Phil 1:15-18). As a Christian, Paul now taught and persuaded people but he would never coerce or persecute again. He was willing to spend and be spent for others, even if he was not loved in return (2Corinthians 12:15).

Christianity is a peaceful religion. It is based on the “gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15). Jesus, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), never raised a violent fist against another, even when assaulted (1 Peter 2:23). He never owned a sword; He never smote an enemy; He never sued a foe. His true followers today should imitate His peaceful behavior (1Peter 2:21–22). While Christians “earnestly contend for the faith” (Jude 1:3), they do so with words, not weapons. Evangelism is done by teaching and reason (Matthew 28:19), never by threat or violence. Christians seek to follow peace with all (Hebrews 12:14; Romans 12:18).

Any religion that teaches followers to hate “unbelievers” and to force conversion by threat of physical harm does not deserve a seat at the table in the marketplace of ideas. A few have marched under a false flag and committed violence in Christ’s name. The Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades come to mind. Yet these never did so at His behest, and they will face His gavel at the last tribunal (Matthew 25:31–33).

Applications:

1. When you consider yourself, have you found yourself “hating” and justifying it because it is “in the name of the Lord?”
2. If “loving” was easy, why did we have to wait for God to demonstrate His love (Romans 5:6-8)?
3. How then does love really manifest itself? And, what does love “kill in the heart?”

For Next Week: How did Paul learn to see that SIN was his real problem?

LESSON NOTES