

Acts Chapter 7 v 54 - 60 & Acts Chapter 9 v 1 - 9

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[0 : 0 0] Before we come to that, I'd like to read a few verses from Acts chapter 7. Right at the end of Acts chapter 7, verse 54, we read what happened immediately after Stephen had preached a very convicting, powerful sermon to the rulers of the Jews at the time, the Sanhedrin.

This is what we read in verse 54 of chapter 7. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him, at Stephen that is.

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 coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

[1 : 3 2] 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 approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church.

Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. And turning over to chapter 9, verse 1.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. 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.

[2 : 5 5] As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying 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 they didn't see anyone. Saul got up and go into 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.

I wonder if you've ever watched Mastermind on the TV.

[4 : 22] You know how the lights go out and the chairs there, the empty chair, and then some poor individual comes to that chair, the spotlight is on him or her, and they're faced with a question that is just unanswerable.

Now the experience of Saul of Tarsus was faced with a question which was infinitely more painful and significant than any question put in Mastermind.

The blinding spotlight of the all-seeing, all-knowing, holy, righteous God was upon him.

And a question was put to him that was sharper than any surgeon's knife. Now the Bible speaks about the word of God as being sharper than a double-edged sword, penetrating even to the dividing of soul and spirit's joint and marrow.

It judges thoughts and attitudes of the heart. And Saul heard the voice of God in the question, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[5 : 45] Now it wasn't just the power of the question, but Saul was overcome by the awesome presence of God.

God who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all. God was there. God was present there.

And Saul was in that awesome presence. As the church was studying judges, in Judges chapter 13, Manoah, the father of Samson, had an encounter with the angel of the Lord.

And immediately afterwards, the terrified man and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. And he said to his wife, We are doomed to die.

How could he live? Having seen God, he realised it was God there in front of him that he'd experienced, that had spoken to him. How could he live?

[6 : 52] Such an awesome thing, to know and experience God. And at the beginning of our service, we were reminded of the experience of the Apostle John, exiled to the rocky island of Patmos.

He saw, in his own words, someone like a son of man, hair as white as snow, eyes like a blazing fire, coming out of his mouth with a sharp, double-edged sword, face like a sun, shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet, though dead. So, how would you respond if you were Saul of Tarsus on that occasion, there on the way to Damascus?

Remember what Saul was about. His experience wasn't one like the Apostle John, suffering for the sake of Christ, quite the opposite.

He wasn't going on an errand of mercy. He was on his way to capture Christians in that city and drag them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment and probable death.

[8 : 09] He wanted to eradicate Christianity from the face of the earth. Like some extreme religious fanatics in our world today, in certain parts of Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia.

And he was caught red-handed like a criminal suddenly exposed in a searchlight. How awful for him.

How awesome. I wonder if the word of God has ever come to you like that and you've said to yourself, I'm guilty. I'm lost. I'm undone. What can I do?

What can I do to be saved? Well, Paul experienced that sort of thing much more, I think, than any of us in all probability.

And Paul said of himself at the time, these are his own words, I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.

[9 : 13] Well, we can see in being a persecutor, violent man, yes, involved with stoning, dragging people off to prison, that sort of thing. He was a blasphemer.

What could that possibly mean? He was a religious man. He was, in a way, zealous for God. How could he possibly blaspheme?

Well, he was taking the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in vain. He saw how awful that was. In fact, he was doing a lot more than merely taking the name of the Lord in vain I fear that some here from time to time might use the name of God in a thoughtless and foolish way, not thinking what you're saying.

Well, it wasn't like that. No, Paul, or Saul of Tarsus, was blaspheming out of hatred towards the Lord Jesus Christ and his people.

And there he was, now cowering before the Lord. As he heard this penetrating question, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[10 : 30] I wonder what that was like. I wonder what it's like to face the Lord when we've got to give an account of our souls.

Revelation 20 speaks of an awesome, terrifying future day of judgment. It speaks of a great white throne, pure throne, and him who was seated upon it.

The earth and the heavens fled from them. And John, Revelation 20, saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

The dead were judged according to what they'd done as recorded in the books. Now, in a sense, Saul of Tartus had a preview of that awful day, that dreadful day of judgment, there on his way to Damascus.

And his record wasn't good. Now, of course, we must ask the question, the very serious question, how are we to stand in the presence of an all-seeing, all-knowing God?

[11 : 45] Saul of Tartus had dealt badly towards Christians. And if you're not yet a Christian, how do you treat those who confess Christ, those who clearly love Christ, who rejoice in him, who rejoice in his word, who rejoice in meeting together?

How do you treat Christians? Christians? Now, I'm sure that none of you have been physically violent towards Christians, at least I hope not, but how have you spoken of them and to them?

Have you used your tongue to ridicule those that believe in Jesus? How have you spoken of Jesus?

Have you blasphemed his name? Now, these are very important questions. Saul's outward behavior came out of ignorance and unbelief.

It was a dark state of mind that led him to his mad behavior. And if you speak badly of Christ, if you speak badly of his people, I'll put it to you, it's coming from a dark state of mind, just like Saul of Tarsus.

[13 : 16] So how can sinful men excuse themselves when justice catches up with them and there's no escape? What will you say in your defense when you've got to face the judgment of God?

Saul could say nothing. He was a quivering heap. Now it's helpful for us to know who recorded this account of Saul on the road to Damascus.

Helpful for us to answer the question, who was it for? Why was it that Luke, the scholar, medical man, and a historian wrote his account in the Acts of the Apostles?

It was, of course, the same Luke that wrote the famous Luke's Gospel. And he introduced his survey of early church history, the Acts of the Apostles, with these words.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. Writing to Theophilus.

[14 : 29] He's writing to the lovers of God. That's the meaning of the word or the name Theophilus. Not likely that he had a single person in mind. He went to too much trouble to assemble and record all those facts.

His well-known gospel was about the things that Jesus began to do and to teach, and the book of Acts is about what the risen Christ continued to do and teach.

The account of Jesus' humbling soul is a very important part of what Jesus continued to do. Luke wanted to inform the lovers of God in his day.

He saw the humiliation of the proud soul of Tarsus as being so important that it was recorded three times during the Acts of the Apostle.

Three times the things that Jesus continued to do. Well, there are several reasons why the conversion of Saul was so important. today is a day when many churches choose to remember suffering persecuted Christians across the world.

[15 : 41] Churches and individual believers have been persecuted throughout history. Even a casual reading of the New Testament reveals the early days of the church were no different.

Religious leaders and Roman emperors were determined to destroy Christianity. It wasn't easy to live as a Christian then. So one purpose of Luke would be to comfort Christians who are suffering for their faith and those who would have to face suffering.

The suffering involved martyrdoms and imprisonments. We know about those. They're infamous. But these sufferings were just like the visible part of an iceberg that's visible to all.

Imprisonment in those days included deliberate torture and brutality along with poor nourishment, extremes of heat and cold. Sometimes you read about Christians in Eritrea who are locked up in container boxes and suffer no insulation at all.

They suffer the heat of the sun, the cold night temperatures, and of course imprisonment, wherever it was at the time, meant poor health, disease, wasting away.

[17 : 01] But what about family dependence? What about those left behind? For them it meant poverty, sickness, shame, being ostracized from their communities.

And even Christians in this country lose their jobs from time to time because of their faith. They sometimes fail to get deserved promotion because of their faith. And we occasionally hear of this, but what about their dependent families?

When we read the persecution, we only read the headlines. We hear of murders and kidnappers and closures of churches as is happening in Burkina Faso today, Nigeria, China, Algeria, Sri Lanka and India, but our knowledge is fairly superficial.

We barely enter into the pain of the loss of homes and income, loss of freedom to meet together, deprivation of fellowship, suspicion of others, false brethren who betray believers to the authorities.

We probably don't think about the breakup of families, sleeplessness, mental, emotional and physical illnesses associated with persecution. We look at the headlines and really think about the small print which would help us to really enter into the pain of those who are being persecuted.

[18 : 26] The suffering of the persecuted is much broader, much deeper than the most shocking reports that we're conscious of. So Luke wrote in part to help believers at the time, in part to help lovers of God of his day and of course ourselves today.

So what are the important lessons we can all learn from the question the Lord Jesus put to Saul, whatever way we suffer? What would Luke's original readers learn as they faced suffering?

Well, first of all, they'd be reminded that the Lord knew their situation, the Lord knew about their sufferings, the Lord knew the persecutor and the persecuted, the Lord knew all about Saul, he knew him by name, Saul, Saul, he knew where he was, he knew what he was planning to do, and met with Saul on the journey to Damascus.

The Lord knew all about Saul, he knew exactly where to meet him, to interrogate him with the maximum effect, to bring him to his senses, he knew his past. There was no possibility for Saul to evade the interrogation about the persecution of Christians, he was there about that dreadful business.

Jesus knew how Saul had been involved in the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen, and then went around from house to house dragging off both men and women and putting them into prison.

[20 : 11] persecution. The fine details of what his persecution meant was fully known to the one whose eyes were like blazing fire.

He saw into the hearts and minds of persecutors, and persecuted, and the question, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me, was not necessary for him.

Jesus knew the answer. He knows the hearts of everyone, each one gathered here tonight. I remember as a young man listening to someone praying, and I was struck with this, this young man prayed of the Lord who knows us through and through.

And the Lord Jesus knew Saul through and through, he knew the sufferings of the people and their heartaches through and through. He knew Saul better than Saul knew himself.

But Saul, like each one of us, needed to examine himself and ask himself, were he acted as he did?

[21 : 27] So Saul, Saul, why? Why do you persecute me? And the meeting of the Lord Jesus Christ with Saul reminds us that he takes particular account of the suffering of his people.

There are many instances recorded in scripture about the Lord knowing about the suffering of his people and entering into the suffering of his people. You haven't got to go far in the Old Testament to come across such an instance.

There's that situation recorded in Exodus chapter 2 verse 23 when the people of Israel were suffering in Egypt, suffering a long time.

This is what we read, Exodus chapter 2 verse 23. During that long period the king of Egypt died, the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant. So God looked upon the Israelites and was concerned about them.

[22 : 49] He was concerned about their suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. The Lord knows the sufferings of his people. David wrote in Psalm 34 verse 15, the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry.

Very important for us to remember that Jesus knows about the suffering of his people and our sufferings if we're suffering in any way.

And it's important for us to know that when suffering goes on for long periods of trial as was recorded in Exodus chapter 2.

You know there's a big temptation when sufferings go on for a long time when you have a trial that goes on and on and there seems to be no answer to your trial.

Isaiah in chapter 40 deals with that particular temptation to doubt that the Lord knows and the Lord enters into the suffering of his people.

[24 : 05] Isaiah chapter 40 verse 27 I believe is preparing the sufferings of the preparing the Israelites for their suffering under the Babylonians sometime in the future.

You see the Lord not only knows what's in the past what's happening in the present but he knows the future and he is preparing those Israelites for their future suffering with the Babylonians.

He was entering into the way their minds would operate and he wrote this why do you complain Jacob why do you say Israel my way is hidden from the Lord my cause is disregarded by my God.

The Lord knew what was to happen to the Jews at the hands of the Babylonians. He knew in advance. He knew how the Jews would respond and he prepared a word of rebuke for them for their faithlessness.

Not only does the Lord know about our present sufferings he knows what future trials will involve even for the most confident believers. Remember Peter's faith.

[25 : 25] Remember what the Lord said to Peter and warned Peter that he would stumble that he would fall and he spoke to him on the night of the arrest his arrest.

The Lord knew what would happen. He knew how Peter would respond. He knew Peter thoroughly. He understood the situation that Peter would find himself in before the event and he prayed that Peter's faith would not fail.

And if we're to pray for suffering Christians we're to pray that their faith might engage with the all-seeing God who cares for his people.

The Lord knows about the suffering of his people but there's more. His people are precious to him. They are as the apple of his eye to them.

The Lord cares for every individual believer. He identifies with all. So he asks Saul Saul, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[26 : 38] He didn't ask the question why are you persecuting my people but why are you persecuting me? Jesus identifies himself so closely with his people.

There's such a close link between Christ and his people that he speaks of Saul persecuting him. If a child suffers, the parents suffer with that child.

If you burn your hand in the oven, your brain makes some response. Your hand is part of your body. and the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian church, Christ is the head of the body, the church.

Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 22, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. One body. And perhaps on that occasion on the road to Damascus, Paul began to understand for the first time there's a union between Christ and his church.

When he heard those words, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? As we saw earlier, Christians suffer in many different ways in times of persecution.

[27 : 59] Imprisonment, yes. In economic hardship, yes. In sickness, yes. forced migration and separation from home and family, yes.

Christians suffer in health and sickness at other times too. Why should we remember the link between any suffering Christian and the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church?

What should influence what we say and do? How does that work out in time and eternity? you're familiar with that parable that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke about the sheep and the goats on the general day of judgment when the Son of Man comes in his glory?

Notice how he treats the sheep, his sheep, those that know him, those that are known by him. Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in.

[29 : 18] I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was ill and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Verse 40, the king will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

The link there between Christ and his church, the link between Christ and every suffering believer. And any suffering Christian reading the account of the Lord asking Saul, why are you persecuting me, should be cheered in any distressing circumstances, by the union between Christ and his church.

Those suffering in the first century, those Christians suffering in the church in the first century, would be heartened by the identity between Christ and his church, but also the 21st century, our century.

And if you're cast down for any reason, you too should be raised up by knowing that you are in Christ and that he's in you, that you're precious to him.

The Lord knows what his suffering people goes through. He knows, he takes and shares it personally, but there's more. Why was it that the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus in this way?

[30 : 51] Was it simply to humble him? Was it like a court appearance to bring him the justice he deserved? How do you read that passage? Was it to display his power over Saul?

What was the attitude of Jesus towards Saul when he repeated his name, Saul? Saul, why do you persecute me?

Did Jesus speak in the same way to others? Did he repeat the same noun, if you like, to others? Did he speak it towards anyone else who killed faithful men who stoned those who came to them with the word of God?

Did he repeat the naming of the person? Well, the answer is yes. Yes, of course. Matthew chapter 23, verse 37, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those who sent to you, know how often I long to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you are not willing.

There's a pathos there. There's grief. There's compassion. There's love. Saul, Saul, what was going on?

[32 : 20] What was Jesus doing on this encounter to the road to Damascus? Well, why did Jesus come into the world anyway? Well, you know the answer.

He came into the world to save sins. He came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. He's the good shepherd who came for his sheep, his lost sheep.

And, of course, we've been reminded of that during the children's talks over recent weeks. Jesus, the good shepherd. Jesus, the shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

Jesus who calls his sheep by name. That's what was going on here. We've got Paul's own explanation of what was going on in 1 Timothy 1 and verse 12.

Paul said, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that's in Christ Jesus.

[33 : 28] Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I'm the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience.

As an example for those who believe on him and receive eternal life. And the note of compassion there in the question is an encouragement to suffering, persecuted Christians.

An encouragement not just to feel safe and secure and known and blessed and loved, but to have a different attitude towards their persecutors.

It raises the hope that at least some of them might be saved. Jesus himself prayed for his persecutors, forgive them because they don't know what they do.

Matthew chapter 5 verse 44, Jesus urged us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us that we might be the children of our father in heaven.

[34 : 46] That is, that we might be like our father in heaven. And if we behaved in this way, it would be clear to all that we're the children of God, that we're like God, that we bear our father's likeness.

And of course, the Lord Jesus is at work in our lives that we might be conformed to his likeness. It's a great challenge in this question, not just to Paul, Saul of Tarsus, but to each one of us.

Do we have the mind of Christ, the Saviour? When we pray for persecuted churches and Christians, we should pray that they might know that the Lord hasn't forgotten them and that he cares for them.

But we should also pray that they miraculously might have a different attitude towards those who persecute them. Pray that they might recognize the possibility that some of their persecutors might be saved.

But how should we respond to all of this? If you're a godly person, or you regard yourself as a godly person, looking at things in a god-like way, shouldn't you try to know and learn about the suffering of those who are being persecuted?

[36 : 17] The Lord knew. Are you determined to know about the suffering of the persecuted church? And then, do you see yourself as being in Christ, as being united with Christ?

If you are, you're united to everyone else who's in Christ. Christ. And in a sense, every single believer in him throughout the world, throughout history at all times, in all places, not only in Whitby, but everywhere, is part of Christ in union with him.

So, when you hear about the suffering of any Christian, do you share in their pain? pain. And then, Jesus intervened on behalf of his suffering church.

And if you're one with him, shouldn't you do something to relieve the pain of at least one person who suffers?

Either here, here in Whitby, or somewhere else, the other side of the world. At least you can pray for the faith of those who are tested, and seek practical ways within your power to bring about relief.

[37 : 41] So, this passage puts this question to you. It's a painful question, it's a searching question. How are you going to intervene on behalf of those who are in Christ, who are suffering?

let's pray. Gracious God, we are very self-centered, and we are also very unbelieving, and we don't enter into the troubles of your people, and we fail to see the troubles of others.

and we certainly do not very often really suffer with them, suffer as being with them, and we confess that we are miles away from what we should be, and we're also very ignorant as to what we can do to help others.

pray, O Lord, that you would help us to see, to suffer alongside, and to do what we can to relieve the sufferings of others.

For we ask it in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[39 : 11] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.