

Saul the Pharisee **Acts 8:1-4**

This is what Luke wants our first impression of the Apostle Paul to be: He was a Pharisee and a young man named Saul who opposed the Church. He had something to do with the death of Stephen. He was filled with rage and severely persecuted the Church.

This background material on Saul the Pharisee will help us understand the Apostle Paul

Here are some key Scriptures to help you understand Saul:

Then they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul....Saul agreed with putting him to death. Acts 7:57-58 and Acts 8:1 (HCSB)

Saul is in the group that confronts Stephen and is unable to dismantle Stephen's teaching of Scripture. In other words, Stephen was able to present Jesus in such a way that not even Saul the Pharisee could get the better of him. Saul is described as being young but he's been a Pharisee longer than Stephen has been a Christian. Saul was educated and trained to be a Jewish religious leader. Stephen was an ordinary guy who was selected to help widows in needs. How do you explain this? This is the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to His followers. (See Acts 1:8)

Here's the timeline of events leading up to Stephen's martyrdom:

Acts 4 – Arrest and warning
Acts 5 – Arrest, warning, flogging
Acts 7 – Martyrdom
Acts 8 – Severe persecution

You should also notice the attitude of the people:

Acts 2 – The Church has the favor of all the people
Acts 6 – The synagogue group stirs up the people
Acts 8 – Persecution breaks out AFTER the view of people changes

Not only was persecution unleashed against the Church. It was systematic and the impact was devastating. According to Acts 8:3, Saul went from house to house. If you remember from Acts 2, the Christian community found its strength in house meetings and now that strength is being systematically dismantled. Some might think this is the end of the Church.

Watch what God does as a result of this persecution.

All except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. Acts 8:1
Those who were scattered preached the Word wherever they went. Acts 8:4

Who was scattered? Not the apostles.

What did those who were scattered do? Preached the gospel wherever they went.

Home Group Discussion Questions:

1. What in this short story concerns or challenges you?
2. What do you think of this introduction of the Apostle Paul as Saul the Pharisee? You'll get some details on the Apostle Paul later in this book but his starting point in Acts is an aggressive persecutor of the Church. Paul changed from persecutor to preacher. What do you make of that?
3. Why do you think there can sometimes be two very different responses to the gospel? Pastor Karl mentioned the gospel, and gospel living, can be attractive or even repulsive to people. Do you have any ideas why that might be so?
4. You may have heard Pastor Karl refer to a pattern in the book of Acts: *Rejection in one place will lead to opportunity in another place*. How do you respond to this? Encouraged? Fearful? Ambivalent?
5. How has the study in Acts helped you so far?
6. What have you learned about yourself in the past year?