

### **Day #3: God Uses Crisis to Move People – Changing Hearts**

**Read: Acts 9:15-16; Acts 14:22; 2 Cor. 11:23-29**

Saul of Tarsus. The best of the best. Sincere. Zealous. Smart. Highly educated. Passionate in his zeal for God. And dead wrong.

Suffering is central to Saul's story. It starts with his *inflicting suffering* on the church to destroy it, which ironically, God uses instead to *spread* the church. Then after two years, God's purposes in the persecution having been accomplished, the tables turn and now Saul is on the receiving end of the suffering. But let's go back to the beginning of the story.

#### **GOD'S CHOSEN VESSEL TO SUFFER**

On the road to Damascus, Saul is traveling with documents authorizing him to capture, imprison, and even kill followers of Jesus. Suddenly, a bright light flashes from heaven and strikes him down. A voice from heaven says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **Me**?" It is the voice of Jesus! (Jesus' words answer forever the question, "Where is Jesus in my pain?" – a subject for another day.)

Now blind, Saul's posse guides him to the home Jesus had indicated, and for three days he sits in darkness, in stunned silence and awe, wondering *how he could have been so wrong!* At the end of those three painful days, Saul emerges a man with a completely changed heart.

As it turns out, Saul – now going by his Greek name Paul – is God's chosen means to spread the church. Pre-conversion, this happened unintentionally, on his part anyway, as he scattered the church through persecution. But after his conversion the persecutor becomes the persecuted, and he suffers as few others in all of church history. All to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

God said of Saul, "[He] is my chosen instrument...I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." This prophecy proves true, and who can read without emotion Paul's long litany of suffering in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29?

It was not out of vindictiveness that God allowed Paul to suffer; *it's just what was required in order for Paul's mission to be completed.* One time when Paul had reached his limit, God lovingly appears to Paul in a dream to strengthen him. "Do not be afraid [Paul]" God says, "I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you..." (Acts 18: 9-10).

Paul spoke from deep experience when he wrote, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22)

### **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

1) On Easter Sunday morning, Jesus found His disciples “together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders...” (John 20:19). Not many weeks later we find them pouring into the streets (Acts 2) and public places (Acts 3 & 5:18-25) boldly speaking out in Jesus’ name in defiance of the Jewish leaders’ orders.

What made the difference for the disciples so that they came to willingly accept suffering they knew would come as they walked in obedience to the Lord?

2) Imagine a friend who recently lost a loved one that they had fervently prayed God would heal. Describe what the below two responses might look like:

- Lovingly yielding in faith to this difficult trial knowing God can only act in love towards His children.
- Harden their hearts against God because of the outcome He allowed.