

## **YOUR PERSECUTOR FINALLY MEETS HIS MATCH!**

**Today's Text: Acts 9: 1- 31**

### **Extracts:**

***Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads" [Acts 9: 1-5]***

*Rush Limbaugh, a conservative right idol, hosts a syndicated radio show that is reportedly the highest rated in America, with about 15 million listeners.<sup>1</sup> He can use scathing language to describe anything or anybody that smells liberal. For example, on 16 January 2009, barely a few days to the inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States, Limbaugh said, "I hope he fails." As a result, liberals loathe him and conservatives dread him. That was until 16 February 2012 when Sandra Fluke, a 30 year-old law student at Georgetown University, appeared before a Congressional committee to defend women's health rights. In his radio show soon after, Limbaugh called her a "sluth" and a "prostitute." The national reaction was instant and loud. Even Republican leaders disapproved of his outburst. Within days, over ten advertisers pulled out of his show. On 3 March 2012, the usually unrepentant Limbaugh issued a public apology to Sandra. The persecutor finally met his match!*

*Right now, you may be under one form of torment or other. Someone is making you miserable for no just cause. You feel persecuted, harassed or humiliated. When you keep quiet, they provoke you. When you run, they pursue you. When you fight, they crush you. When will it all end? I have good news for you! In this week's Bible story, the early Christians faced unending persecution from a Pharisee called Saul. Then, he met his match on his way to Damascus to arrest some of them. There is something there to help you to deal with your own situation. Read on!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Story based on the following sources: Brian Wheeler, "Can Limbaugh survive advertiser boycott?" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17263546> , 6 March, 2012; and "Rush Limbaugh-Sandra Fluke controversy," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rush\\_Limbaugh%E2%80%93Sandra\\_Fluke\\_Controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rush_Limbaugh%E2%80%93Sandra_Fluke_Controversy)

## 1. Background: Saul the disciples' persecutor is tamed!

Let me begin with a caveat. This piece is not for those who are pursued by their evil deeds because the soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4]. It is not everybody who forgives. So, when you steal, kill and destroy others, they will run after you to get even. They are not tormenting you, that is, trying to inflict torture, pain or anguish on you. Rather, they are trying to pay you back in your own coins. So, if you find yourself tormented or persecuted for your sins against God and others, you are suffering from self-inflicted injuries.

*Our concern this week is for those who are pursued, harassed or persecuted for being good, especially for trying to be faithful to the word of God* for “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12].

Persecutors will envy you. They will tell incredible lies against you. When you are blessed, it is because you belong to a cult or practise witchcraft! When you fall sick or lack, it is God's punishment for your sins. Even when you die, they will still not be impressed! You represent what they do not or may never have. For that, you must be “eliminated.”

The disciples of Jesus faced that situation after His ascension. They were arrested [Acts 4: 1-3], beaten [Acts 5: 40] and even killed [Acts 7:58-60] for no other reason than that they preached the risen Christ to ordinary people. Our story this week raised the stakes of persecution and intimidation. After the death (by stoning) of Stephen, most of the disciples ran away from Jerusalem and were scattered “everywhere [still] preaching the word” [Acts 8: 4]. For the Jewish leaders (religious and political), the matter had become a national crisis that could threaten their standing with the Romans. That was when a zealous member of the elite class called Saul decided to take the bull by the horns. Here is the story of his daring attempt to stop the Christian “plague”:

### a) Saul's background

Saul of Tarsus was *a Pharisee* and the son of a Pharisee [Acts 23: 6]. The Pharisees were a Jewish religious sect that believed in and attempted to enforce on everybody else the practice of a constant state of purity as defined under the Law of Moses. Of course, we know that law is an ass and even a guilty person can escape punishment on technicalities. That is why anybody who behaves self-righteously or hypocritically is called a Pharisee! Saul was *also a Roman citizen by birth* [Acts 16: 37; Acts 22: 25-28], and he studied law under Gamaliel, a doctor of laws [Acts 5: 34-KJV; Acts 22: 3].

*Saul's zeal for Judaism was unparalleled.* For example, the witnesses that stoned Stephen (the first martyr of the Christian faith) to death laid their clothes at the feet of young Saul [Acts 7: 58]. Recounting his zeal for

Judaism to the Galatian church, Saul (now Paul after his conversion) wrote **[Gal. 1: 13-14]:**

*You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.*

Clearly, ***Saul was a chief tormentor to those disciples that tried to establish the early church.*** For how much longer could they bear such pain?

*b) Saul steps up his persecution of the disciples of Jesus*

“Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” Saul went to the high priest to obtain letters authorizing him to go to the synagogues of Damascus to arrest and bring bound to Jerusalem men and women who “were of the Way” **[Acts 9: 1-2]**. The disciples in Damascus were among those that had escaped persecution in Jerusalem, following the martyrdom of Stephen. Saul would have no rest of mind until they were also destroyed.

Do you think your persecutors are going to leave you alone? Defeat does not discourage them. It only fuels their determination to use bigger and more dangerous weapons of mass destruction against you! Even after Jesus had died and was buried, the chief priests and the Pharisees still went to Pontius Pilate to ask that His tomb be sealed to prevent His disciples from taking away His corpse **[Matt. 27: 62-66]**! Even when that could not prevent His resurrection, they went on to bribe the Roman soldiers that guarded the sealed tomb to say that while they slept, His disciples came to steal His body away **[Matt. 28: 11-15]**! Sooner than later, enough had to be enough.

*c) Saul meets his match!*

Armed with arrest warrants, Saul headed to Damascus, presumably accompanied by heavily armed officers. But, as he approached the city, “suddenly a light shone around him from heaven,” and he was thrown to the ground. Then he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Shocked, Saul asked, “Who are You, Lord?” The voice responded, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads” **[Acts 9: 3-5]**.

Elsewhere, when he recounted the same story, Saul was to add that the voice told him that it was “Jesus of Nazareth” that he was persecuting

[**Acts 22: 8**] to underscore the point that the Jesus that spoke to him is the Son of God that took human form and died on the cross at Calvary. It was His followers that Saul and others had been persecuting. A goad is a long pointed stick used for prodding cattle and other animals. The old KJV uses “pricks” in place of goads and it means those quick sharp pains that you feel when a fine point like a needle is being pushed into the skin. One kick against a bunch of sharp needles can send you into the emergency ward of a specialist hospital! Therefore, ***Jesus of Nazareth was too much of a higher authority for Saul of Tarsus and his sponsors to resist or fight against!*** Saul, the tormentor-in-chief of the disciples of Jesus, had finally met his match!

## 2. How to handle your persecutors

Your tormentors may never go away because you represent their foil or spoil sport. They want to diminish your worth and make themselves feel better by your downfall. Yet, your fear of them cripples your ability to face or fight them off. So, to successfully get your persecutors out of your life, you may try the following:

### a) *Know why you are being persecuted*

The disciples who fled from persecution in Jerusalem “went everywhere preaching the word” [**Acts 8: 4**]. When Saul sought authority from the high priest to go to Damascus, he was looking for “any who were of the Way, whether men or women” [**Acts 9: 2**]. Clearly, ***Saul was not going to Damascus to arrest criminals, such as robbers or tax evaders. He was looking for men and women whose only offence was being faithful followers of Jesus Christ.*** So, the first thing that you must do is to know why you are being persecuted.

The word of God says that evil pursues sinners [**Prov. 13: 21**] and you reap what you sow [**Gal. 6: 7**]. Those you have cheated or stolen from will pursue you until they get their just revenge. Those you have deceived or misled may never leave nor forsake pursuing you for their pound of flesh. If you leave the worship of the true God to serve idols (especially material things), expect Him to also leave you to Satan’s shaking. Therefore, ***once you are sure that you are suffering from the repercussions of sin, confess immediately and reconcile with God and your offended neighbor(s). Thereafter, you will not fear what man can do to you.***

You may, on the other hand, find that you are being persecuted for doing good, such as your faith in God and His Christ or your refusal to compromise your integrity. For example, when the Jews took up stones to stone Jesus for claiming that He and His Father are one, He asked them, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those

works do you stone Me?” As they sought again to seize Him, He escaped out of their hand [**Jn 10: 31-39**]. When the priests and the prophets tried to get Jeremiah killed for prophesying the coming exile of the children of Israel to Babylon, he said to them, “You know for certain that if you put me to death, you will surely bring innocent blood on yourselves, on this city, and on its inhabitants; for truly the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.” In the end, his enemies could not muster enough political support to get the prophet killed [**Jer. 26: 11-24**]. Therefore, *when you are being tormented for being good, fear not because He that is with you is greater than all of those against you.*

b) *Recognise that the battle is not yours*

Left to themselves, the disciples of Jesus would not have been able to beat the religious and military machines wielded against them respectively by the Jews and the Romans. But *Jesus* who had promised at the point of His resurrection that He would always be with them, even till the end of the age [**Matt. 28: 20**] *was there to fight for them*. He told Saul of Tarsus that it was He, Jesus, that he was persecuting, not His disciples. The bright light from Jesus struck Saul blind and he had to be led by the hand into Damascus where he spent three days without food and water. Meanwhile, the Lord appeared to one of the frightened disciples there, Ananias, to go to the street called Straight, into the house of Judas, to lay hands on Saul to receive back his sight. When he expressed his fear of that dreaded name, Jesus informed Ananias that Saul was a chosen vessel of His to take the Lord’s name to the Gentiles. Thereafter, he went and did as he had been commanded. Saul received his healing, received water baptism and became a disciple of Jesus [**Acts 9: 8-19**]!

*Therefore*, you must recognise that the battle is not yours but the Lord’s [**2 Chron. 20: 15**]. *He will neither leave you nor forsake you* [**Heb. 13: 5**]. He has called you by your name and you are His. You will pass through fire but you will not be burnt, nor can the flames scorch you; you will pass through deep waters but they shall not overflow you [**Is. 43: 1-2**].

c) *Forgive when you finally win*

*Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus*. He even began to preach the Christ in the synagogues and he “increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that Jesus is the Christ.” *When the Jews plotted to kill him for betraying them, it was the disciples who took him by night and let him down in a large basket through the city wall* [**Acts 9: 20-25**]. Even when the church at Jerusalem was reluctant at first to embrace him, Barnabas took him and

brought him to the apostles. So Saul “was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out” [vv. 26-28]. What does that mean to you?

*When God has given you victory over your persecutors, do not gloat over their fall because it displeases the Lord who may then turn away His wrath from your enemy [Prov. 24: 17-18].* By the disciples giving Saul a welcoming reception, he became a major vessel in God’s hands. Can you imagine how exhilarating it can be when those who used to malign you now praise you?

When God is with you, who can be against you [Rom. 8: 31]? *As a result of Christ’s intervention on behalf of His church, “then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified [and] walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied [Acts 9: 31].* That can also be your portion in Jesus’ name!

### **3. Conclusion: Satan is always behind your persecution!**

Satan poses as an angel of light; so do his ministers transform themselves into ministers of righteousness [2 Cor. 11: 14-15]. Your battles are not against flesh and blood but against wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly places [Eph. 6: 12]. Therefore, *even though your persecutors may pose as agents of public good, trying to enforce laws and/or traditions, they are actually doing Satan’s bidding.* That was why, after Saul (now Paul) had become a Christian, he wrote to Timothy, admitting, “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man ... I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” [1 Tim. 1: 13].

So, always remember that Satan is that persecutor roaming around you right now, roaring like a hungry lion looking for whom to devour [1 Pet. 5: 8]. Resist him/her with your steadfast faith in Christ Jesus who has already disarmed principalities and powers, making a public show of them and triumphing over them in it [Col. 2: 16]. *Satan is always behind your persecution, accusing you falsely night and day but be of good cheer. You have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of your testimony [Rev. 12: 10-11].*

Alleluia!