

Saul of Tarsus

There is powerful and incontrovertible evidence for the reality of the God who is portrayed by Moses in the Old Testament and also by Jesus in the New, who declared, *"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life" - John 5:24*. The apostle Paul made it his life's work to proclaim the gospel of Christ, being convinced that *"it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."* Paul upheld this because he believed the evidence that God had *"declared"* Jesus *"to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" - Romans 1:4, 16*. The resurrection of His crucified Son was God's method of making it once and for all clear to all mankind that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one whom God had first to *"make His soul an offering for sin" - Isaiah 53:10*.

This absolute acceptance by Paul, that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical fact, calls for explanation. The religious elite among the Jews - those who were held as the most highly educated and the best informed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament - these men completely, repudiated Jesus and proclaimed him to be a fraud. The young Saul of Tarsus was raised up and educated as a Pharisee, holding resolutely to the Law of Moses, as explained by the tradition of the elders. That tradition looked for the Messiah, the promised descendant of king David - **2 Samuel 7** - who not only would be a student of the Law of Moses, but would fight God's wars and champion the worship of God in the temple at Jerusalem.

Truly, Jesus was regarded by the ordinary people as a great rabbi or teacher of God's law, and he twice banished commerce from the Temple. But Jesus refused to take up the sword or lead a rebellion against their Roman overlords, instead instructing his followers to submit to their rule, finally and meekly submitting himself to them by his ignominious death by crucifixion. Such an attitude was anathema to the religious authorities and they set out to destroy Jesus who had declared, *"I came to send fire on the earth" - Luke 12:49*. Under ordinary circumstances the death of Jesus would have destroyed the movement which he had launched - this would not be the first time a movement was snuffed out this way - **Acts 5:36-37**.

Instead, the apostles were busy campaigning again, and Christ's fire was re-ignited with renewed vigour and rapidly spreading - *"Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" - Acts 5:14*. Saul of Tarsus did not stop to ask himself how this could have happened. Instead, he joined in the blind fury of the religious elite in a persecution, even to death - **Acts 7**. Afterwards, as an apostle of Jesus, Paul told the believers in **Galatia, 1:13**, *"You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers."*

The question needs to be answered: how did Saul the persecutor of Jesus suddenly change to become a leading advocate of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Previously, Saul well understood that death was God's punishment for sin. He also knew the Scriptures which foretold the sacrificial death of God's Servant for the forgiveness of that sin - *"...Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself" - Daniel 9:26. Isaiah 53:6 "...the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all...8 ...He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people...11 ...My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities." Psalm 22:16 "...They pierced my hands and My feet."* Resolutely rejecting a crucified Messiah, Saul was among those whom Jesus declared, *"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" - Luke 16:31*. Saul, with the others, refused to believe that Jesus was alive again. Only solid evidence could convince Saul that Jesus really was alive.....