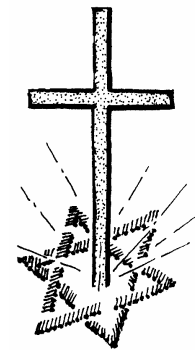


Journey From Religion to Relationship



LESSON 1 . . . When You Mess Up “Big Time” (Acts 6:8-8:3)

Have you ever messed up “big time”? We are beginning an exciting study of the apostle Paul’s life, a “journey from religion to relationship.” When we first meet Paul (Saul) in the NT, he is messing up “big time.” When we mess up “big time,” the Evil One rushes in and whispers, “God can never use you now.” However, Paul’s life reveals even when we mess up “big time,” God will forgive us and continue to use us. As we look at Paul’s background, we will discover two things to remember when we **mess up “big time.”** First . . .

NOTES

God has a purpose for our lives before we are born.

Saul was born in Tarsus, in what is now modern-day Turkey. He was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:27), a privilege that would help him on several occasions during his ministry. “Paul” was his Roman name, and his Jewish name was “Saul,” probably after the first king of Israel. Unlike the other apostles who were considered *unschooled, ordinary men* (Acts 4:13), Saul was highly educated. He was educated in the law by Gamaliel, one of the most revered rabbis of his day (Acts 5:34 & 22:3).

Paul sums up his pre-Christian life by saying he was *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee* (Phil. 3:5). Then, what does Paul write in the next verse?

Circumcised on the eighth day means he was a Jew by birth, not a proselyte Jew. *Hebrew of the Hebrews* means both of Saul’s parents were Hebrew by birth, so he could trace his genealogy back to Abraham. He was *a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee* (Acts 23:6), which made him a member of the group of Jews most loyal to the authority of God’s Word. What does Paul write about himself in Galatians 1:14?

Saul was also *faultless* (Phil. 3:6), which means he meticulously followed the letter of the Jewish law. He was one of the most brilliant and zealous of the Pharisees. Saul was very religious, but he had no personal relationship with God.

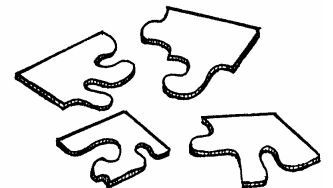
Jewish parents, like Saul's, believed if you didn't teach your son a trade, you taught him to steal. Therefore, Saul was trained in the practical trade of tent making (Acts 18:3). This trade would help Saul support himself and his associates during his later missionary journeys.

God began preparing Saul for His life purpose when He chose his parents, and that set in motion the chain of events and experiences that arranged Saul's early life. Who chose your parents? How does Psalm 139:13 answer that question?

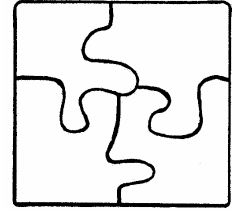
The Bible also says: *All the days ordained for me were written in God's book before one of them came to be* (Psalm 139:16b). God planned you and me before we were born. Many of us came from broken homes, and all of us came from imperfect homes with imperfect parents. However, we must honor our parents because as with Saul, God sovereignly chose our biological mothers and fathers. Each of us has inherited a set of chromosomes from his/her biological father and a set of chromosomes from his/her biological mother. At conception, God chose to weave these chromosomes together to create unique gene pairs that made you with the talents, gifts, intellect, and personality you need to be matched perfectly for His purpose for your life. Regardless of parental shortcomings, hurts, rejection, etc., God chose your parents to create you because He wants you to have a certain combination of chromosomes and childhood experiences.

Nothing in Saul's heredity, background, experience, or training would go to waste. It was all part of God's plan to prepare the greatest of all the apostles. The same is true of you because of what wonderful promise in Romans 8:28?

God made you and allowed the experiences—good and bad, glad and sad—you need to fulfill His purpose for your life. God has a purpose for allowing every hurt you have ever had. It's part of the preparation of His wonderful plan for your life. To be used by God, we must understand God doesn't want to waste any of our talents, experiences, training, or hurts. They are all part of His divine purpose puzzle for our lives. When we



come to Christ, all the parts of the puzzles of our lives come together to help us fulfill God's purpose.



When we mess up “big time,” we must remember **God has a purpose for our lives before we are born**, and just as wonderful . . .

God can use us in spite of our worst mistakes (Acts 6:8-8:3).

God's Word makes this clear because it reveals to us that even the greatest OT saints faltered in faith, had doubts, and committed terrible sins. Moses and David were murderers, but so was one of the greatest NT saints, the apostle Paul. God always reveals the faults and sins of His great saints to give us hope. As we study Saul's life, we will learn no matter what we have done, God can still use us in a mighty way.

The first time we meet Saul, angry Jews are stoning a young man (Acts 7:57-58a). What do we read about Saul in the last part of verse 58?

What's happening here? One of the first seven deacons—Stephen—is being stoned to death. He has been declaring Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and was raised from the dead, and by placing faith in Him, you can have all your sins forgiven. The Jews had precipitated Jesus' crucifixion with false charges and a kangaroo court. However, after they had Him crucified, they were plagued with reports He had been sighted, and His followers were claiming He had been raised from the dead.

Finally to their relief, the sightings ceased. Then, Jesus' followers began to teach He had ascended into heaven. The Pharisees were just glad He was gone. However, a young man named Stephen began to preach about the death and resurrection of Jesus with incredible power. What do we read about Stephen in Acts 6:8?

To confirm His hand is upon Stephen, God enables him to perform miracles, just as Jesus had done. This strikes terror in the hearts of the Pharisees because if people begin following the resurrected Christ, it will mean the end of their religious positions and power. Therefore, as they had done with Jesus, they secretly persuade some people to testify they heard Stephen blaspheme against Moses and God (Acts 6:11).

This results in Stephen being dragged outside the walls of Jerusalem, for it was against Jewish Law to stone anyone inside the city walls. Saul watches as they pick up stones and begin to throw them at Stephen's head.

Saul watches the first stone hit Stephen. Then, he watches as a second stone, a third, and then more come so fast and furiously they cannot be counted, hitting Stephen's body. Stephen stands as long as he can, but finally the stones take their toll, and he falls to his knees. Then, what does he pray in Acts 7:60a?



As soon as his prayer ends, Stephen falls over dead. One of the persons for whom Stephen was praying was Saul. In our way of thinking, Stephen died prematurely. However, he lived long enough to expose Saul to his supernatural ability, and his death and prayer would play a vital part in the conversion of the greatest of all the apostles. Saul was no innocent bystander to all this. How does Acts 8:1a make this clear?

Thus, the first time we meet Saul he is gladly assisting in the brutal killing of the first Christian martyr. Stephen's demeanor and prayer did not touch Saul's heart that day, for it was filled with hatred for all Christians. But no doubt Stephen's heroic death played a part in changing Saul's heart. We never know how God is going to use our hurts and suffering to touch others.

Saul's hatred doesn't end here because he then tries *to destroy the church* and goes *from house to house*, dragging *off men and women* and putting *them in prison* (Acts 8:3). The word translated *destroy* is translated "havock" in the KJV. It means "to ruthlessly devastate." Saul ruthlessly devastated many homes, leaving children without parents and causing untold pain and sorrow. It's hard to believe this is the man God would later inspire to write the great love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul never tried to justify or rationalize his sin. He didn't play the blame game by blaming his parents or religious training. Instead, what does he write about himself in 1 Timothy 1:15b?

Paul then explains how God can use us in spite of our worst sins. He writes: *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life* (1 Tim. 1:16).

Although Saul was a deeply religious Jew, zealous for his faith, and what he did was in ignorance, he made no excuses but instead considered himself *the worst of sinners*.

Though his sins were all forgiven, Paul had to live with the memories of his sin for the rest of his life. That's what makes sin so bad. We can be forgiven but we may have to live with the memories and consequences of our sins for a lifetime. How does David describe this truth in Psalm 51:3?

We are free to choose whether to sin or not, but we are not free to choose the consequences of our sin. However, looking back, Paul could see Jesus' *unlimited patience* (1 Tim. 1:16) in dealing with him. When we mess up "big time," God demonstrates His *unlimited patience* and offers us the same forgiveness, so we too can be used of God.

When you mess up "big time," remember **God has a purpose for our lives before we are born** and **God can use us in spite of our worst mistakes**. These principles are true because Christianity is a relationship, not a religion. Religion teaches what we need to do for God. Christianity teaches what God in Christ has already done for us on the cross by taking our "minuses" and changing them into "pluses." Religion says "do"; relationship says "done."



We all have regrets and we have all messed up "big time," but God can still use us. What in this lesson speaks to you most about the fact God can use you even **when you mess up "big time"**?
