

## EASTER 2023

You just saw the testimonies of people bragging on what JESUS has done in their life. These stories exist because Jesus exists; because He didn't lay dead in a tomb but rose from the grave. These stories don't exist because Jesus was a traveling preacher, but rather, because He is the eternal Son of God who became man so that He could die on a cross to pay the penalty of our sin; end the curse that left all of humanity as outsiders to God; that established us as God's favored sons and daughters who get to live His life forever! You saw these testimonies because of what happened on this day 2,000 years ago; the day the greatest news ever told first got proclaimed – Jesus is alive!

Now, if you will give me a few minutes, I would like to share another story of somebody whose life was forever changed by the resurrected Christ.

There was once a man named Saul who grew up to be an extremely popular defender of his nation, culture and religion. He truly made everybody proud. He was the son every Jew longed to have.

It all started when he was young. He was highly intelligent and knew multiple languages and cultures, but nonetheless he stayed completely committed to the Jewish laws and customs. His credibility and potential gave him the opportunity to be a student of one the most famous rabbis in Israel's history. The older he got, the more prominence he gained as a student, practitioner, and preacher of not only the Mosaic Laws, traditions and customs that God gave the Jewish people after He rescued them from Egypt, but also the oral laws generations of Jewish leaders prior to him had developed to protect and preserve the Mosaic Law and customs.

In short, Saul was a true patriot who loved his nation and his nation's God, and as such Saul longed for the day the oppressors of their lands would finally be defeated. He longed for the day a descendant of David would march into Jerusalem, overthrow the Romans and reestablish the glory of God through Israel. He longed for the land to flow with milk and honey as it once did. Saul longed to see the nations honoring God, and Israel as God's chosen people. He was a young, visionary, energetic leader who was willing to give his life to his God and nation to defend it against anyone who threatened it, but especially those who threatened it from within.

So, you can imagine how he felt the day he learned of a rapidly growing movement in Jerusalem that claimed a man named Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah and King!

The Sunday after the Passover festival, Saul likely heard the rumors about the Christ followers claiming He had been resurrected, but in general, things stayed quiet until 50 days later. On the day of Pentecost, a man named Peter preached a sermon and thousands became followers of Jesus. Every day after that more and more Jews did the same!

Imagine how he felt when he found out they were proclaiming Jesus was the promised King! Imagine how he felt when he found out they were accusing the leaders Saul admired, studied under, and longed to emulate, of unjustly putting that King to death. Imagine how Saul felt about these people who were then claiming, this Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father ruling a Kingdom that they said was God's true Kingdom. They were even proclaiming things that seemed to suggest the laws, traditions and heritage they had celebrated for more than 1,000's years had been fulfilled and replaced by this King with something better! Imagine what went through Saul's mind as he heard them make outlandish claims that this Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God, the Everlasting One, the Promised one, and as such, He is going to return with judgement in His hands for all who refused to repent and follow Him into this new and better Kingdom!

It shouldn't be hard to imagine that the tension in Jerusalem could be felt everywhere. Those believing in Jesus were gathering together every day to learn more about Him and then scattering back across the city proclaiming what they had learned. However, for every person that converted, there were others who were enraged by what they considered to be a complete and total offense to everything it meant to be a Jew, one of whom was a man named Saul.

It all came to a head one day when a man named Stephen was arrested and brought before the judges of the land for preaching against Israel and its religion. They accused Stephen of suggesting this resurrected King would destroy the temple and change the laws and customs they had clung to for centuries! After questioning Stephen and listening to him preach at them, a man they would have considered unworthy of even being able to teach the Scriptures, Stephen then had the audacity to say he could literally see Jesus Christ standing right beside God the Father, ruling His Kingdom! He wasn't prophesying of a future King, but of a present King and Messiah ruling God's people, and this enraged everybody at the trial, so much so, they immediately drug him out of the city and stoned him to death. Now, Saul didn't throw a stone, but he was there helping lead the effort and the proof of his leadership came in what he did next. Acts chapter 8 says,

**1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:1-3)**

This went on for some time, until eventually Saul decided to extend his hunt beyond the walls of Jerusalem. He wasn't going to let these Christians, many of whom had now fled the city of Jerusalem, to regroup somewhere else and gain more followers, so in Acts 9 we read this,

**1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that**

**if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)**

Paul's level of hatred for these Christ followers was deep. He was about to travel 135 miles to go find more and drag them all the way to Jerusalem to put them in jail and/or have them executed as they had done with Stephen! However, the risen savior Jesus Christ had other plans for Saul. Listen to what happens next,

**3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (Acts 9:3-7)**

That day changed everything for Saul. His passion went from being one of the greatest defenders of the Jewish culture and religion, to the most impactful proclaimer of the resurrected Christ in history. No one impacted the church more than Saul, who is more commonly known as Paul. Saul didn't become Paul; he had always had two names. Paul was his Greek name and Saul was his Hebrew name. This practice wasn't uncommon for Jews who, like Saul, did not grow up in Judea.

After Saul met Jesus his entire life change. The rising star in Jewish culture named Saul ended up being known more by his Greek name Paul as he planted and nurtured churches all over the Roman Empire. In addition, he wrote at least 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament, if not 14 (some think he wrote Hebrews). So, by modern expectations, given all this, you would think Paul was living large during his ministry. As strong of a leader as he was, as successful as he was, you would think everything in his life would have been a cake walk; after all, it was Christ Himself who called Him and empowered Him!

However, if that's your vision of how Paul's life went after meeting Jesus, then you are grotesquely mistaken. Listen to his testimony,

**24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)**

If this was your story of following Jesus, I don't think anybody would think anything wrong of you for questioning whether it was worth it or not; some might even understand if you gave up on following Jesus! But Paul wouldn't be one of those people. Listen to what Paul said about both his past and his present,

**7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-- 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:7-14)**

The upward call is NOT what you think. You see Paul wasn't following Jesus to have a great ministry, to get a bunch of money, experience fame or even with the expectation that he would have a healthy and fun life; but rather Paul was following Jesus to experience eternal life, Christ's life, God's life; the life that is not of this world nor even measurable by the things in the world. The life that never fades, not only in its existence but also in substantive quality. The life that is pure love and thus has no sin and therefore no death. He had met the resurrected Christ and had seen this life in person! Paul not only saw physical life beyond the grave, but He also saw who that life is, and as such what it is.

Therefore, Paul joyfully spent the rest of his life moving forward in the upward call of GOD which is literally to know HIM and experience HIS LIFE now and forever! Paul wasn't waiting around to go to heaven when He died, but rather, He was following Jesus so he could grow in the experience of the life that is Christ now, no matter His situation!!

Now understand this, when Paul said he gladly left everything behind for the opportunity to know and follow Christ, for the opportunity to experience God's life, that included the guilt and shame of knowing he had previously ravaged Christ's church! Jesus, the eternal Son of God asked Paul, "why are you persecuting me?" This was no mild offense, Paul was arranging the imprisonment and execution of men and women, and as such orphaning children. He was doing all this to those who were following the one Paul himself had actually prayed to come! Imagine the guilt and shame Paul experienced once he realized all that he was doing in the name of God was actually against GOD, all while bringing untold suffering and even death to others!

So, when Paul said he left it all behind, he wasn't just leaving his successes and celebrity status; he wasn't just leaving wealth and power, he also had to leave the guilt and shame that came the very instant he realized what he had done. Paul never again looked backwards because The One he met on that road was too amazing to turn away from.

The life He was given, the same life you and I have been given, was so much better than anything this world had to offer, that the only reason he could look backwards was to brag

on what Jesus had done; to point to the path that Jesus had him on that took him from where he had been, to where he currently was, and most importantly where he was going!

From the moment Paul met Jesus, he was moving forward in the life he had met on that road to Damascus, and no matter what happened on that road, every day he was on that road, was a day further from the man he used to be, and a day further into the life that is only found in Christ. Looking backwards with too much attention could have caused Paul to be impressed with how far he had come, and as such, possibly lose motivation to keep enduring the race. But, with his eyes looking forward Paul had every reason to keep trusting and following Christ because the upward call of God, and the prize of His life, while becoming more of a reality each day, was still far short of what Paul had come face to face with on that road to Damascus so many years before!

So, here's my challenge for you,

**Challenge: Is your past an anchor of regret or a marker of praise for what Jesus has done, is doing, and is still yet to do in your life?**

Every time Jesus called somebody, he called them to leave where they were and follow Him forward!

Therefore, when Jesus found you on the road of your life and you repented and started following Him, the wounds of your past, the sins of your past, even the victories of your past, are not who or where you are today; they are your past! Your future is heaven, that is, your future is the glorious life of Christ, a future you can start living in now if you will just stop trying to live in your past!

Those who continue to live in the past, whether it be past victories or defeats, are saying the past is more glorious than the resurrected life we have in Christ now and in the future; you are saying what Jesus has to offer for all eternity isn't good enough to live for; it isn't worthy of pressing on!

So, you ruined your marriage beyond repair. You ruined your relationship with your children. You destroyed your finances with greed or materialism or some other reason. You wrecked your life and family with a drug addiction. You've wasted decades of life living in emotional drama, worthless pursuits or just general not living. You've found yourself living in sin you can never talk about, things you would have never imagined yourself capable of doing. You've been harmed, betrayed, disrespected, mistreated and maybe even abused. You've lost people you truly loved, people your life was so intertwined with that part of you died when they died. It's all terrible and horrible because it's all a part of the reality of life in a world under the curse of sin and death.

But listen, if you gave your life to Jesus, no matter how present some of those realities may seem, it's your past! It may be as present as today, as in right now, but Jesus isn't meeting you here at North Gaston High School in Dallas, NC to talk about yesterday, He's here to talk to you about today, tomorrow and the rest of eternity! He's here to lead you into HIS life!

Do you want life or not? Do you want the sin and separation that was placed on Jesus on Friday or the life that rose from the grave on Easter? Are you going to keep letting your past, good or bad, be where you try to live your life, or will you have the faith to believe the Resurrection of Jesus guarantees you a life now and forever that is entirely different and better than anything you or this world has to offer; an eternity worth pressing forward to grow and experience in no matter what today or tomorrow brings! Forget the grave and walk in life!