*DAILY DEVOTIONAL*

April 19 - 24

Paul

**Monday, April 19 Acts 7:54 – 8:3**

*“Saul began to destroy the church”*

The rage of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council), pent up so long in repeated trials and confrontations with the followers of Jesus, could be contained no longer. It was as if someone had given a prearranged signal and they all rushed in on Stephen, including a young man named Saul (who, after his conversion to Christianity, came to be known as Paul). Later, near the end of his life, Paul clearly stated that he added his vote to the Sanhedrin’s death sentence. After Stephen was beaten, since no blood could be spilled in the temple grounds, they dragged the dazed and injured Stephen outside the city wall where he was stoned to death.

Stephen’s prayer as the death blow hit revealed to Saul the faith of the martyr: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and his heart: “Do not hold this sin against them.” One wonders what Saul must have thought as he heard the name he had grown to hate so passionately, and as he witnessed the way in which a follower of this Jesus met his death – not with anger and bitterness, as was in his, Saul’s, heart, but with a forgiving spirit.

*Give me the courage, Lord, to respond to hate with love and forgiveness. Amen.*

**Tuesday, April 20 Acts 9:1-19a**

*“Saul was uttering threats against the Lord’s disciples”*

Born and raised by Hebrew parents in Tarsus, Saul had both Hebrew tradition and Greek culture flowing in his nature. As a young man, his parents’ stature and resources, plus his own brilliance, had won him the sought-after privilege of studying under Gamaliel, the greatest Hebrew intellectual of the time. Saul later became a member of the strict sect of the Jewish religion called the Pharisees. They were committed to returning the nation to complete obedience to the Law and the tradition of Moses.

And yet, Saul had not lost his knowledge of and conditioning by the highly intellectual atmosphere of the Hellenistic world. He was exactly the kind of man Jesus needed to lead his movement. While Saul was tracking down Jesus’ followers, the Lord was tracking him, waiting for the right moment. The Lord was setting the stage. The very one whose persecution had caused some of the Lord’s people to flee to Damascus and start strong churches there would be central in the Lord’s strategy for the future.

*You are at work in the world, Lord, spreading the Gospel in unexpected ways. Amen.*

**Wednesday, April 21 Acts 9:19b-31**

*“Immediately he began preaching about Jesus”*

*Immediately!* Saul could not wait to go to the Jewish synagogues in Damascus to share the good news he had just received. It was too amazing to keep to himself. He came right to the point: “Jesus is the Son of God.” The Jews in the synagogues were dumbfounded. None other than Saul of Tarsus was saying Jesus was God’s Son, the Messiah promised by the prophets in their Holy Scripture. The persecutor was now a proponent!

Saul’s immediate witness solidified his vision and strengthened his conviction. There could be no more effective place for him to establish his newfound faith than in the synagogues. He took his stand among his people. There was no turning back now. But Saul knew something else right from the beginning – the hostility of his own people. Eventually that would send him on his appointed task of reaching out to the Gentiles. The angry resistance he felt from the Jews right from the beginning was a foretaste of what he would know all his life. The escape in a basket over the wall in Damascus was only the first of many close scrapes with death.

*May I be as bold as Saul, Lord, in sharing my faith with others. Amen.*

*DAILY DEVOTIONAL*

April 19 - 24

Paul

**Thursday, April 22 Acts 21:37 – 22:21**

*“He addressed them in their own language”*

Paul was a well-educated man, having grown up in Tarsus which boasted one of the three leading universities of the Roman Empire. He spoke not only Greek, the language of the intelligentsia, but Hebrew, the language of religious Judaism, and Aramaic, the common language of the Jewish people. Displaying his natural leadership and superior public speaking abilities, he tells his story to the Jews in Jerusalem in a way that glorifies Christ and dignifies the Christian movement.

Here is a dramatic “before-and-after” account of the transformation of a human being. It is witnessing at its very best, delivered to the people with kindness, gentleness and respect. Paul describes the man he was and the man Christ has enabled him to be. At each stage of his evolving witness he clarifies that it is Christ who has changed him. The careful recounting of his conversations with the Lord establishes the foundation of his testimony. Jesus Christ is alive, and he is the guiding Lord of Paul’s life.

*Help me to share my faith, Lord, with kindness, gentleness and respect. Amen.*

**Friday, April 23 Acts 22:30 – 23:11**

*“My hope is in the resurrection of the dead”*

Luke, the author of Acts, has not been reluctant to expose the human frailties of Paul. In the Apostle’s heated exchange with the high priest, his anger is evident. When his opening statement about his integrity is challenged, and Ananias inflicts a punishment that is not only highly offensive but also illegal in the context of a trial before the Jewish high council, Paul responds impulsively and angrily points out the hypocrisy of the high priest. Paul’s response is neither humble nor in keeping with Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek.

It’s not our mistakes that do us in; it’s our pride, because pride keeps us from admitting them. Paul had overstepped the boundaries of Christ-centered behavior, but Christ in Paul made him willing to admit how wrong he had been to address the high priest in an insulting manner. Paul sinned in his anger, but he displayed Christ-likeness in his humility. Paul then gives us the reason behind his bold claim of integrity: his hope is in the risen Christ. For Paul, nothing mattered more than to live for his risen Savior.

*Living for you, Lord, may my life reflect yours in integrity and humility. Amen.*

**Saturday, April 24 Acts 26:1-18**

*“Paul started his defense”*

Having been accused of blasphemy against God by both the local Jews in the imperial city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean shore of Israel, and by Jews who had travelled from Jerusalem, King Agrippa gives his permission for the Apostle to speak in his own defense. Paul begins by affirming the king’s knowledge and understanding of the customs and affairs of the Jews. In substance he was saying, “If anyone can understand how false the charges against me are, you can.”

Then he forcefully establishes the reason he is on trial: he believes that the hope for which he and the Hebrew people have longed has been fulfilled. Paul clearly identifies that hope with the resurrection of Christ. Again, as in earlier defenses of his ministry, the Apostle reviews how vigorously he had opposed and persecuted the Christians, and how that had prepared him for the mighty transformation that happened in his life when he met the risen Christ who made him a new man with a new purpose.

*You have made me new, Lord, and given me a new purpose for my life. Amen.*