

God Loveth an Oppressor

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“For the Lord does not see as humans see. We look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” — 1 Samuel 16:7

What would you do if you discovered that a respected member of your church used to be a violent criminal? Or if your minister once held hateful, racist beliefs? Most of us would struggle with that revelation. We’d question their sincerity, their motives, maybe even their place in the congregation.

Yet that’s exactly the kind of transformation God brought about in one of Scripture’s most influential leaders: the apostle Paul.

We often remember Paul as the bold preacher who endured beatings, imprisonment, and mobs for the sake of the gospel. We quote his encouragement to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” We study his letters. We admire his courage.

But Paul didn’t start out as a disciple. He started out as an oppressor.

In 1 Timothy 1:13, Paul describes his past plainly:

“I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.”

If we were Timothy, we might have said, *“This can’t be the same man.”* But it was. And to understand Paul’s transformation, we have to revisit the moment he first stepped into the biblical story — not as a hero, but as a witness to murder.

The Young Man Who Approved of Death

Acts 7 introduces us to Stephen, a Spirit-filled servant who preached boldly in Jerusalem. His wisdom frustrated his opponents, who stirred up false accusations against him. When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, the crowd erupted. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him.

And there, watching with approval, was a young man named Saul.

Acts 8:1 tells us:

“Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.”

Saul absorbed the hatred of the crowd. Their violence shaped him. And like many oppressors throughout history, he carried that influence into adulthood. He began ravaging the early church

— dragging men and women from their homes, throwing them into prison, determined to destroy the movement of Christ.

He believed he was right. He believed he was justified. He believed he was doing God's work.

The Light That Interrupted Hate

On the road to Damascus, everything changed.

A light from heaven knocked Saul to the ground. A voice called his name:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Saul knew exactly who was speaking. He had seen the evidence in the lives of the Christians he hunted. He had seen the courage of Stephen. He had seen the Light, and now the Light confronted him.

Jesus didn't say, “Stop sinning.” He said, “Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.”

God wasn't just stopping Saul. God was *reclaiming* him.

Ananias, understandably, was terrified when God told him to restore Saul's sight. But the Lord said, “He is My chosen instrument.” And that settled it.

Saul began preaching Christ with the same intensity he once used to persecute Christ's followers. People were stunned. His former allies were furious. His enemies became his brothers. His friends became his pursuers.

By Acts 13, Saul had taken on a new name - Paul - and a new mission.

What Paul's Story Means for Us Today

Paul's transformation teaches us something we often forget:

Never underestimate the power of Christ to change a human heart.

Saul was as committed to hatred as anyone could be. Yet God saw potential in him, not the potential we see, but the potential only God can see.

Imagine if our churches looked at people the way God looked at Saul.

We wouldn't label gang members as “lost causes.” We wouldn't assume racists can't repent. We wouldn't dismiss violent offenders as beyond redemption. We wouldn't write off public figures who spread division, assuming they could never change.

We would look deeper. We would look spiritually. We would look at the heart.

Public influence doesn't make someone unreachable.

Saul's actions affected entire communities. His reputation was widespread. His hatred was public. And yet God still chose him.

So what would we do if someone we despise, a political agitator, a hate-group leader, a corrupt official, suddenly proclaimed faith in Christ? Would we believe them? Would we trust them? Would we allow God to work?

We might question their motives. We might wait to see if their actions match their words. But God already knows their heart.

The Heart God Sees

Saul's three days of blindness and fasting were likely days of reflection, days of wrestling with everything he had believed. We don't know exactly what he thought. But we know what God saw.

God saw a heart that could be transformed.

And that's the point.

No one is beyond change when Christ enters the equation.

Not a murderer. Not a racist. Not a corrupt leader. Not a violent oppressor. Not even... you or me.

God sees what we cannot. God sees what we refuse to. God sees the heart.

And when God sees the heart, redemption becomes possible.