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The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus Evangelism Series #6

“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.” (1 Timothy 1:13)

When I was a university student in the early 1980s, I needed a part-time job to pay for my expenses. I was hired by the UCLA Extension office on campus to do filing, typing, copying, and running errands. One of the ladies who worked there was named Debbie (not her real name). I could tell by her Bible and all the Scripture verses on the wall of her cubicle that she was a Christian. I was not a Christian and lived a very wicked life at my fraternity. I picked on her, told crude jokes, and made fun of her from time to time. My joking escalated and things got out of hand. It reached a point where one day I desecrated her cubicle and did something evil with some crafts she brought from home. When she came into her office and saw what I did, she became very upset and told me, “You’re a very sick man!” I knew I had crossed a line and felt terrible about my actions. Rather than humble myself, I decided to quit and look for another job. I left with a lot of shame, but I was too proud to admit I was wrong.

Shortly afterward, I believed in Jesus as my Savior and Lord, repented of my sins, and began to follow the teachings of the Bible. One day I went to a church located in a large warehouse in the north part of Los Angeles near Van Nuys. As I sat down in my chair, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Debbie was seated near the back of the church. My heart began to race. Fear immediately gripped my thoughts. What was I going to do? I finally decided to talk to her after the service. I needed to ask for forgiveness. When the Pastor finished the sermon and dismissed us, I went to

the back of the church and waited until she finished talking with her friends. I walked up to her and said, “Hi, Debbie!” When she saw me smiling and holding my Bible, she let out a scream! *I knew I was ugly, but did she have to scream?! She asked in disbelief, “Have you become a Christian?”* I said, “Yes!” What she said next would stay with me forever. She said, *“I thought you could never become a Christian!”* For some reason, she thought I was beyond reach. In her eyes, I had become a hopeless case. She did not know then that I would eventually marry and raise a Christian family, pastor a local church, and become a teacher in the body of Christ.

I wonder how many of us are doing that right now with family members, people at work, drunks, prostitutes, and homosexuals. *We only see who they are now. If we could only see that God could save them, and give them a powerful testimony that will impact many others. We must stop seeing with our eyes and start seeing with the eyes of the Lord.* Maybe you’ve given up on someone because he doesn’t appear to change. The more you talk to him about the Lord, the more he seems to rebel. Maybe it’s a person on drugs. Maybe it’s your sister-in-law who drives you mad. Maybe it’s that co-worker who tells dirty jokes, has a filthy mouth, and pokes fun at Christianity. Have you given up because you can’t see what the Lord sees? *Maybe you need to read again the story of Saul of Tarsus.* Galatians 1:23-24 says, “They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching

the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they praised God because of me.” Perhaps this person you’ve given up on may one day “preach the faith he once tried to destroy.” Maybe one day you will be praising God because of him.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9 was the greatest conversion in the history of the world. That Jesus would bypass others, go right into the enemy’s camp and take the angry commanding general of the opposition, save him, and convert him into the greatest apostle that ever lived, is a story for the ages. It was the most amazing display of God’s grace and mercy toward a man that we have ever seen.

How God could sovereignly choose a man who was destroying His people, forcing them to blaspheme, approving their murder, dragging Christian men and women into prison, beating them, and then save him and entrust him with a final revelation of God’s eternal plan for mankind is beyond human comprehension! This is one of the greatest stories ever told.



Later in life, he would write in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. 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.” If Saul can be saved, then there is hope for anyone!

I believe that the conversion of Saul of Tarsus offers us tremendous insight into God’s plan of evangelism. So this is another teaching to encourage and motivate Christians to win the lost. Churches today are not winning the lost to Christ. There is a lot of “transfer” between churches, but for the most part, we are not growing. We may have outreach programs, but Christians are not really talking to others about Jesus and witnessing to them. The great missionary statesman Oswald J. Smith once said, “Oh my friends, we are loaded down with countless church activities, while the real work of the church, that of evangelizing the world and winning the lost, is almost entirely neglected! Don’t neglect the call of the church to reach the lost.”¹ The famous Charles Spurgeon (pictured) wrote, “If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and

unprayed for.”² The great John Wesley said, “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most.”³ And finally, Samuel Chadwick wrote, “Why does the church stay indoors? They have a theology that dwindled into a philosophy, in which there is no thrill of faith, no terror of doom and no concern for souls. Unbelief has put out the fires of passion.”⁴



Let us now look at the life of Saul of Tarsus, so that we will never say, “*I thought you could never become a Christian.*”

The Terrible Tyrant from Tarsus

Saul of Tarsus was enraged. He was bent on destroying the church of God. He even approved the murder of Christian believers. He summarizes his former way of life in 1 Timothy 1:13 with these words: “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.” A careful review of the book of Acts will reveal how he lived:

Acts 8:3 – “Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into prison.” The Greek word for “destroy” is “*elumaineto*,” which is used only here in the New Testament. It means “to destroy, devastate, or ravage,” and signifies the act of ferocious animals, such as bears, wolves, or wild boars devouring their prey. One translation reads, “Saul was going everywhere to *devastate* the church.” He would describe it this way in Galatians 1:13: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how *intensely I persecuted* the church of God and tried to *destroy* it.” Acts 8:3 also says that he “dragged out the believers.” The words “dragged out” in Greek mean a violent and forceful dragging. It gives the idea of “hauling off” a bag of trash so heavy, you have to drag it on the ground. The same Greek word is used in Acts 14:19: “The crowd stoned Paul and *dragged him* outside the city, thinking he was dead.” Remember, he was dragging off “both men *and women*, and throwing them into prison.” How would you feel about someone who grabbed your wife or daughter by the hair or her dress, and dragged her along the ground with great force and rage, and then physically threw her in a prison cell? No wonder he wrote that he was “a violent man.” Saul had an issue with anger!

² Ibid, page 93.

³ Ibid, page 174.

⁴ Ibid, page 55.

¹ *One Thing You Can’t Do in Heaven*, Mark Cahill, Biblical Discipleship Publishers, Rockwall, TX, page 48.

Acts 9:1-2 – “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.” Notice the word “breathing.” One Greek commentator says this verse “means that threatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle. He breathed on the remaining disciples the murder that he had already breathed in from the death of the others. He exhaled what he inhaled.”⁵ Destroying the church now became his full-time passion. Saul was so infuriated, he would stop at nothing – not even murder. He wanted the Lord’s disciples either dead or in prison. And notice once again that he didn’t care whether they were “men or women.” Acts 8:3 said he went after “both men and women,” and in his testimony in Acts 22:4, he “arrested both men and women.”

Acts 9:13-14 – “But Lord, answered Ananias, I’ve heard about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And we hear that he is authorized by the chief priests to arrest every believer in Damascus.” The Lord Jesus told a disciple from Damascus named Ananias to go look for “Saul of Tarsus.” Ananias rightly questioned the wisdom of this highly improbable choice. Are you sure, Lord, that you have the right person? Ananias lived in Damascus, a city about 150 miles north of Jerusalem. He heard that Saul was doing “terrible things” or “much evil” (ESV) to the saints in Jerusalem. Now he was coming all the way to Damascus to arrest “every believer” there. Paul would testify personally later in Acts that “I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.”⁶ That he would go to different cities to arrest, harass, and persecute Christians reveals the intensity of his passion. Startled by God’s choice, Ananias questions the sanity of picking Saul the persecutor.

Acts 9:21 – “All who heard him were amazed and asked, ‘Isn’t he the one who in Jerusalem was killing those who worship that man Jesus? And didn’t he come here for the very purpose of arresting those people and taking them back to the chief priests?’” The Jews of Damascus were thoroughly confused by what had happened to Saul. One minute he is consenting to the death of the Christians in Damascus, and the next, he is preaching that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ! He came to Damascus for the express purpose of arresting Christians and bringing them back to the chief priests in Jerusalem. He came to persecute; but now he’s preaching! Saul started Acts 9 with threats to kill

Christians, and before the chapter is over, the Jews are threatening to kill him! He went from persecutor to persecuted in one chapter! The very thing that Saul was doing to Christians, the Jews were now doing to him. The Bible says, “After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.”⁷

Acts 22:4-5 – “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, the high priest and the whole Council can prove that I am telling the truth. I received from them letters written to fellow Jews in Damascus, so I went there to arrest these people and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem to be punished.” According to the best chronological Bible, Acts 22 takes place 21 years after Saul’s conversion in Acts 9.⁸ Agabus warned Paul in Acts 21:11 that the “Jews at Jerusalem would bind him” and “deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” A mob of angry Jews attacked Paul and he is rescued by soldiers before they have a chance to kill him. He is given permission by the Roman commander to address the people. Now he is going to share his personal testimony.

The violence of the persecution that he exacted on Christian believers is clearly seen in these verses. He didn’t just “persecute them,” he “persecuted them to their death;” he didn’t just “arrest them,” he “arrested them by throwing them into prison;” and he didn’t just “bring them back;” he brought them “back in chains to be punished.” This man was furious. I picture a man with the veins popping out of his neck, and screaming at the “followers” of Jesus.

At this point, I want to magnify the importance of sharing your personal testimony. This is what Paul does in Acts 22 and 26. This is something that no one can take away from you. No one can question it. You have a personal experience with the risen Christ that no one can argue against.

Recently, I was at a roller skate park handing out tracts and witnessing to young people, mostly teenagers. I began to speak with a 9th grader from one of the local high schools. He told me directly, “I don’t believe in God. I believe in evolution.” I responded, “You mean, you believe that nothing created everything?” This momentarily set him back as he considered the truthfulness of my statement. I added, “I believe in creation. If you have a painting, you must have a painter; if you have a building, you must have a builder; and if you have a creation, you must have a Creator.” Then I pointed to the sun and said, “Do you see that sun up there? If it were hollow, it could hold one million

⁵ A. T. Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament, commentary on Acts 9:1.

⁶ See Acts 26:11, NLT.

⁷ See Acts 9:23-24.

⁸ *The Reese Chronological Bible*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, pages 1428 and 1515.

earths! And if we were a little bit further away from the sun, we would all freeze to death; if we were a little bit closer, we would all burn up. The earth is suspended on nothing while spinning around that sun in a perfect orbit that keeps us from freezing or burning up. You can believe in evolution, but I choose to believe in a Creator, the maker of all things.”

My words upset this young man. By this time, about ten teenagers had gathered around us as they heard the debate going on between us. In a brief moment of anger, the young man clapped his hands, raised his voice, and asked, “Give me proof that there is a God!” The Lord was with me as I immediately responded, “He’s standing right in front of you!” “What do you mean?” he asked. I said, “I was once a violent, wild, rebellious, and blasphemous man who only served myself and the devil. I lived a life of lust, perversion, and destruction. Jesus Christ got a hold of me in college and radically changed my life. I was lost, but now I’m found. He totally delivered me from my destructive life and gave me a new life in Him. I am a changed man by the mercy and grace of God, and that’s why I’m out here today telling you about Jesus Christ. Do you want proof that there is a God? I’m living proof that Jesus is alive and risen from the dead!” With that, the teenager had nothing further to say. Like Saul of Tarsus, who can deny your personal testimony? When Jesus delivered the Gadarene demoniac, and he wanted to follow Him, the Lord told him, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you. So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.”⁹ Every Christian can tell others what Jesus has done for him.

Acts 22:19-20 – “Lord, I answered, they know very well that I went to the synagogues and arrested and beat those who believe in you. And when your witness Stephen was put to death, I myself was there, approving of his murder and taking care of the clothes of his murderers.” Some overly zealous Christians believe that you should witness to everyone everywhere. But in the verse just before these two verses, verse 18, Jesus tells Paul to get out of Jerusalem as quickly as possible because they (the Jews) will not receive his “testimony concerning Me.” What Paul tells the Lord gives us some new insight into his campaign of terror against the church. He confesses that he even went into synagogues and “beat those who believe in you.” So Paul did not casually arrest people and take them to prison quietly. No, he beat them. He physically hurt them. I believe when someone begins to beat and physically abuse others, then he has crossed a line. He’s gone over the edge. His zeal has blinded him and he has lost all sense of reason.

I know that God forgives even the vilest sin, but I think “shedding the blood” of an outstanding Christian believer like “Stephen” has to weigh heavily upon Paul’s mind. Verse 20 recalls Acts 7:58, when Stephen is being stoned to death by the angry mob: “They dragged him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Oh, the guilt! Saul stood there joyfully “guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” Again, I’m showing just how far this man had gone in his persecution of Jesus and His church.

Acts 26:9-11 – “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many times I had them whipped in the synagogues to try to get them to curse Christ. I was so violently opposed to them that I even hounded them in distant cities of foreign lands.” Here is another dimension of Saul’s hostility. Ultimately, he was directly “opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” Several times in Acts, we find that the Lord said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me.” An attack against Christians is an attack against Jesus. This is comforting to know. We are not alone in the battle. We are in covenant with the Lord and He knows and feels our persecutions and afflictions.

He again states that he put “saints in prison,” and voted against them when they were “put to death.” He was complicit. He had blood on his hands. He was so infuriated against believers, that he “whipped them” and even tried to get them to curse, blaspheme, and renounce Christ! This is serious indeed. He not only “opposed” them; he “violently opposed” them even to far-away cities in “foreign lands.” That takes a lot of energy and determination.

So let’s summarize – The very man who whipped, beat, imprisoned, arrested, cursed, and hounded believers, even consenting to their death, was the one that Jesus picked as his “chosen vessel” to reveal His grace and mercy to the nations! As the Bible says, “The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes!”¹⁰ You did not choose Him; He chose you.

Now, what practical things can we say about Saul’s conversion. First of all...

Salvation belongs to the Lord

We cannot save anyone. Only Jesus saves. This is lesson #1 of evangelism. We are not the Holy Spirit. We cannot convict. We cannot force someone to repent. *God alone is the Savior.* King David said in Psalm 3:8, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” The disobedient

⁹ See Mark 5:19-20.

¹⁰ See Mark 12:11, NIV.

prophet prayed from the whale's belly in Jonah 2:9: "Salvation belongs to the Lord." The great multitude in Revelation 7:9-10 cried out, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb." John heard a great multitude in heaven say with a loud voice in Revelation 19:1, "Alleluia! Salvation belongs to the Lord our God!" The Psalmist said in Psalm 68:20, "Our God is the God of salvation." In 1 John 4:14, the apostle writes that it's "the Father who has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world." James 4:12 says, "There is only one Lawgiver who is able to save." Hebrews 7:25 reads, "Jesus is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him." Titus 3:5 says, "But according to His mercy, *He saved us.*" 2 Timothy 1:9 reminds us that "God has saved us and called us with a holy calling." Matthew 1:21 tells us that "Jesus will save His people from their sins."

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" Here's the response from Jesus in these three gospels:



"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible;" "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible;" "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."¹¹ We quote these verses when we find ourselves in a difficult situation,

but Jesus was speaking specifically about salvation. If we try to save someone, it's impossible; but with God, all things are possible. It was "Christ Jesus who came into the world to save sinners,"¹² not us. The truth is, we cannot even save ourselves.

Saul was not saved at a church service. No one handed him a gospel tract and explained the plan of salvation. No Christian witnessed to him about the glories of Christianity. Christians were fleeing from him. He was persecuting them to the death. *His salvation was a sovereign act of grace by God and God alone.* Three times the Bible records that it was "a light from heaven,"¹³ not a sermon from earth. No amount of arguing, theological explanations, or practical analysis by man would have convinced Saul. If God is not dealing with a man's heart, no amount of persuasion is going to win him over. Your job is not to save people; that's God's job. You are to share the gospel with the lost and trust that God's word will not return void. Paul wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase."¹⁴

¹¹ See Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27 and Luke 18:27.

¹² See 1 Timothy 1:15.

¹³ See Acts 9:3, 22:6, and 26:13.

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.

When you are witnessing, you may be planting or you may be watering, but it's God who gives the increase.

"Saul, Saul"

Acts 9:4, 22:7 and 26:14 say the same thing: "Saul, Saul, why are you (singular) persecuting Me?" Jesus didn't say, "Hey, all of you, why are all of you persecuting Me?" Did you notice that none of Saul's traveling companions got saved? None of them were blinded. None of them were baptized. None of them were called by God. We know that other men were with him for Acts 9:7-8 says, "And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one," and "they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus." In Acts 22:9 and 22:11, Paul would testify later in Jerusalem that "those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of *Him who spoke to me,*" and "since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me."

Jesus was only addressing Saul, not the others. When speaking before King Agrippa, he said in Acts 26:13-14, "At midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard *a voice speaking to me.*" Again, Jesus was speaking only to Saul.



We have no record in the Scriptures that any of Saul's traveling companions believed in Jesus, even though it was a supernatural, glorious encounter with the risen Christ. When Ananias was sent to Saul in Damascus, he only prayed for Saul and baptized him, and no one else. Jesus would tell Ananias something very critical about Saul in Acts 9:15, "Go, for he is a *chosen vessel of Mine.*" Paul even remembers Ananias saying to him in Acts 22:14, "Brother Saul...the God of our fathers has *chosen you* that *you* should know His will." Saul was God's choice and not the others. Jesus was after one man, not the whole group. Why didn't the other men get saved? Because Jesus appointed and elected only Saul of Tarsus. Saul was the chosen vessel.

This is an important point. 1 Timothy 2:4 hangs on a banner at the front of our church sanctuary. It says, "God our Savior desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." God wants everyone saved. 2 Peter 3:9 reads, "The Lord is not willing that *any* should perish but that *all* should come to repentance." 1 John 2:2 says, "Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of *the whole world.*" Jesus wants everyone saved and everyone to repent, because He died for the sins of everyone. But Jesus was not worried that Saul's

traveling companions did not believe in Him. This is a very valuable lesson in evangelism: *We don't choose the Lord; the Lord chooses us!* John 15:16 says it plainly, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you." Paul would write later in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "From the beginning *God chose you for salvation* through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth." Do a simple word study in the Bible on the words "chose," "chosen," "choice," and "choose." Over and over you will see that it is the Lord who is choosing us; we are not choosing Him. Both Matthew 20:16 and 22:14 say that "many are called, but few are chosen." *The ones who are chosen are few.*

I feel many times like we're working hard just to get people to raise their hands, say a prayer, so we can boast about how many believed in Christ. Numbers, numbers, numbers. Jesus was not just interested in numbers, but *chosen vessels*. *In my evangelistic efforts, I have spent hundreds of hours working with people who were called, but not chosen.* The result has been a lot of futility, emptiness, and frustration. The ones who are chosen have a willingness, a driving passion, and a heart-felt desire to serve the Lord and please Him. Saul was a passionate man. He was wholehearted. He was single-minded. He didn't have to be continually prodded to follow after the Lord. He immediately went to the synagogue and preached Christ.

The Greatest Conversion

The radical transformation of Saul is one of the greatest proofs that Jesus is alive. He went from church persecutor to church apostle in one chapter. I know people right now who are agnostics. An agnostic does not deny the existence of God and heaven, but rather holds that one cannot know for certain if they exist or not. This is pure baloney! Not only do we have the fantastic creation that is all around us, *but we also have Paul the apostle*. Acts 9:1 reveals Saul plotting to kill and imprison Christians, and by Acts 9:23, the Jews are plotting to kill him. How can a man try to destroy the church one year, turn around and write the eternal Word of God the next?! Paul is one of the most famous people in the history of the world. By the Holy Spirit, his life and writings have changed the history of the world, especially Western civilization. The famous historian, Will Durant, once wrote that the Reformation in Germany with Martin Luther was the single most important event in European history (See *The Reformation*, Volume 6, A History of European

Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin). The Reformation was founded on the writings of Paul in his book to the Romans. No Paul, no Reformation. If you go to the main rotunda/reading room of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., you will see that our country's forefathers believed that the two most important figures in the history of "religion" were Moses and Paul – not Muhammad or Buddha. The significance of Paul's conversion in the truthful witness of the Christian faith should never be underestimated. Many prominent church historians and commentators believe that the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the single greatest event in the history of the church after Pentecost.

Paul's conversion has become an important part of God's eternal Word. I'm convinced that his writings on the grace of God were rooted in the grace of God shown to him. He often wrote about his former way of life in his letters as these verses reveal:

- Philippians 3:6 – "I was so zealous that I persecuted the church."
- 1 Corinthians 15:9 – "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."
- Galatians 1:13 – "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it."
- 1 Timothy 1:13 – "Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief."
- Galatians 1:23 – "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy."
- His conversion is told three different times in the book of Acts – Chapters 9, 22, and 26.

Because of his unique importance in Christian and world history, especially knowing that he wrote 13 books of the New Testament, and that he spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the Roman Empire, I don't know of another conversion that can be compared with his. The 18th Century English statesman, George Lyttelton once said, "The conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation." (See *The Book of Acts*, F. F. Bruce, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, page 196.) Jesus is alive. Saul of Tarsus is the proof!

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