

The Conflict Within

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Acts 9:1–5 (NKJV) “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ ⁵ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”

Life is filled with conflict. Conflicts occur in issues of truth, right and wrong, politics, power, control, authority, morality, justice, race, religion, relationships, and worldviews. Are you experiencing conflict? If so, the next question is, “What is the source of the conflict in your life?”

A Jewish leader named Saul, had a conflict. His conflict was with Christians. Christians are people who believe Jesus to be the Son of God and follow Him. Jesus warned believers that following Him would bring them into conflict with those who don't believe: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; ³⁶ and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ ³⁷ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸ And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”¹ In Matthew 10:22 (NKJV) Jesus said, “And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

Following Jesus brought the church into conflict with Saul. Saul was a devout religious Jew. He was a zealous and legalistic Pharisee who hated all disciples of Jesus Christ. Why? It was because followers of Jesus were a threat to Judaism and to his self-righteousness based upon the Law of Moses.

Saul’s hatred of Christians was severe. He was a co-conspirator in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He continually breathed out threats and murder against the disciples of the LORD. He sought and pursued legal action against disciples of Jesus. Saul sincerely believed he was doing the work of God. It is good to be sincere. However, a person can be sincere and yet be sincerely wrong.

What Saul failed to understand was that his conflict with Christians was really a conflict with Jesus Christ. Saul encountered the living Lord Jesus Christ: “Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’”² Jesus’ question “Why?” was a call for introspection. Jesus wanted Saul to consider the real source of his inner hostility

¹ Matthew 10:34-39 (NKJV)

² Acts 9:4 (NKJV)

and determination to persecute the Church. He wanted him to face the conflict within. Saul's hostility was not against the Church but against Jesus Christ.

Maybe you are experiencing an internal conflict with a Christ follower. You despise the change that Jesus has made in their life. You despise the change in their moral standards. You despise the joy and peace they have found. You despise their commitment to pray, read the Bible and to be with other believers. You despise their invitations to come to Christ and to church. Have you ever stopped to consider the real reason behind the conflict within?

Saul hated Jesus, but WHY? He had never stopped long enough to get honest with his own heart. The answer to that question brought freedom to his soul. It freed him from the hatred and hostility within. It freed him to believe in the gospel that he once sought to eradicate. It freed him to believe in and love the One he once hated. It freed him to love the church which he had once tried to destroy. It freed him to preach the Name of the One he once persecuted: *"Immediately he (Saul) preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. ²¹ Then all who heard were amazed, and said, 'Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?'" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ."*³ Saul's conversion freed him from the conflict within.

External conflicts originate in the human heart: *"Where do wars (battles, conflicts) and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you not think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?'"*⁴ What is the conflict in your heart?

How do we overcome the conflict within? James sets forth eleven principles that can help us: *"But He gives more grace. Therefore He says, 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' ⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. ¹¹ Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?"*⁵

First, we must recognize and acknowledge our need for God's grace. We cannot overcome in our own strength. Second, we must stop resisting God and submit to His authority. Third, we must resist the devil who inspires the conflict within. Fourth, we must draw near to God in worship and fellowship. Fifth, we must cleanse our hands of any participation in the conflict. Sixth, we must purify our hearts of the defilements of jealousy, anger, hate, and bitterness. Seventh, we

³ Acts 9:20-22 (NKJV)

⁴ James 4:1-5 (NKJV)

⁵ James 4:6-12 (NKJV)

must mourn over the damage that our past attitude and actions have caused. Eighth, we must let go of our pride and humble ourselves in God's sight. Ninth, we must stop the cycle of evil and poisonous words that undermine and harm relationships. Eleventh, we must stop elevating ourselves as judge. God alone has the right to judge. Twelfth, we must take personal responsibility to obey God's word regardless of what others do.

When we obey God's Word, the conflict within will cease and peace will reign. Let us examine our heart to discover the source of the conflict. Let us be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Remember the words of the apostle Paul who said: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Romans 12:21 (NKJV)