

# Ruined by Religious Ruts

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PHILIPPIANS 3:3-6

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*“For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:3-6).*

**A**n English lady, a strong partisan of the Church of England, was suddenly stricken with a bitter illness, and death was certain. Her minister was visiting, and she remarked, “It is kind of you to come to me, but it is in vain. It is too late to do anything for me now. Mine has been a Christless Christianity, and I must abide by the consequences. I’ve been a good church woman and have passed as a good Christian. I’ve been diligent in my attendance at church. I’ve given generously. I’ve admired Christianity and have tried to bring its precepts into my life. But I have never cared to know of a living Savior or to make a personal acquaintance of the faith, or to know that my sins were all forgiven. It is too late to seek it now. I have the form of godliness without its power. I am now lost—lost forever!”

That unfortunate woman is one of many who have allowed their souls to become famished through “religious ruts.” These “religious ruts” are acts, attitudes, and consequences of a formalism, instead of true faith. In such “ruts,” one’s

faith is dictated by tradition and past training. Religious ruts are the opposite of the tender and seeking heart sought by God (Ezekiel 11:19, 20). There cannot be a greater tragedy than a soul ruined by religious ruts.

Saul of Tarsus is another illustration of this tragedy. His life through early adulthood was directed by religious ruts. His actions, attitudes, and speech all conformed to a formal traditionalism that did not allow any “life” in faith and practice. This ruin which befell Saul is a common tragedy today. Examine Saul’s life, and see if religious ruts are destroying your faith.

## THE FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS RUTS

From Saul’s life, we are able to see how religious ruts are formed and lead to spiritual ruin. Consider the following brief notes on Saul’s early life and religious training. From the apostle’s writings, we are able to gain the following information about him which helps to understand the beginnings of religious ruts in his life.

Philippians 3:5 tells about his parents. Here is all the information we have about the parents from which Saul of Tarsus emerged, but it is enough. He was born to a pharisaical family and was thus trained in the most conservative school of Judaism. Having a Pharisee as a father meant that Saul daily saw a model of one with broad phylacteries, scrupulous and exact legal observances. Evidently, Saul’s family was trained in this strict way (cf. 2 Timothy 1:3).

The early training, influence, and parental example combined to make Saul zealous for the

law and Old Testament practices (Philippians 3:6). His pride in this hereditary faith is obvious (2 Corinthians 11:22; Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5).

From Acts 23:16 and Romans 16:7, 11, 21, we find references to Saul's relatives. The family pride in the hereditary faith was embarrassed when some turned to faith in Christ. While some repudiated the tenets of Judaism, others within the family began to persecute the "new way" and were drawn to Judaism with a greater tenacity. No doubt young Saul, zealous for his ancestral religion, vigorously joined in family judgments about any relatives who had turned their backs upon the family's former beliefs.

Another element of Saul's early childhood which would affect his later years was his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). This prestigious status was due to his parents' citizenship rights. Being a Roman citizen enabled Saul an enjoyment of distinction, honor, and affluence.

The boyhood training of Saul would have followed the normal routine of any Jewish youngster. At five years of age, he began a study of the Scriptures; at ten, he studied thoroughly the manual of Jewish traditional laws (the Mishna); and at thirteen, he became a subject of the law. Probably between the ages of ten and thirteen, Saul was taken to Jerusalem to be trained in a more exact and systematic program under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Under the direction of Gamaliel, Saul would gain fervor for a keen and watchful enthusiasm for the law (Acts 26:5b). The "schoolboy days" were spent as an eager and promising student (Galatians 1:14).

These elements of Saul's childhood combined and gradually developed an ardent follower of the rabbis. The years of study, the zeal of religious enthusiasm, and the arrogant self-righteousness of the pharisaical traditions were developed and perfected in young Saul's life. When a courageous voice dared to expose the "religious ruts" of Saul's religion and call for an honest assessment of his heart, the "ruts" led him to participate in an unthinkable event—the murder of one exposing the inconsistencies (Acts 7:51-53).

Following Stephen's murder, the most violent and ungoverned fury possessed Saul, and he was spurred to open persecution of the Lord's people (Acts 8:1). Saul's zeal had been ignited, and he sought to eliminate the new way that endangered his religious ruts (Acts 8:3; 26:9, 10). His infamous zeal quickly spread (Acts 9:13).

Here then is the tragic narrative of one who was "ruined by the ruts."

As Saul's early life is surveyed, we are able to specify the following factors as contributors to the formulation of the ruinous religious ruts.

First, *an ignorant sincerity* (1 Timothy 1:13; Acts 26:4, 5). Saul really thought he was doing right. But his sincerity was grossly ignorant and actually led him to oppose God! (Cf. Matthew 7:21-23.)

Second, *a closed mind and blind allegiance* (Acts 7:51ff.; 26:14). So closed was his mind that he could not reason with God's truth. His stubbornness rendered him incapable of thinking for himself—his thoughts were controlled by the "ruts" of his traditional religion.

Third, *sinful pride* (Galatians 1:10). He refused to believe that he could be wrong. His pride in Judaism prevented him from honestly examining the truth of Christ's gospel.

Fourth, *early training* (Acts 26:5). His life had been spent in the Jewish faith. His parents and most of his relatives followed Judaism, and they encouraged him to do so. If he left the "ruts" of his family's faith, he would be deserting his family.

These four factors combined to form the "ruts" in Saul's religion. Tradition, past family history, emotional attachments, etc., were allowed to direct his faith. His faith was directed by religious ruts!

## THE FALLACY OF RELIGIOUS RUTS

The great ruin of religious ruts is seen in their hindrance of obedience to God's truth. Saul was lost because he refused to obey the gospel. Saul was lost because he based his salvation upon an inherited faith that was flawed with ruts. Notice how salvation was hindered in Saul's life.

The practice of Judaism was deeply rooted in his life and was in total control (Philippians 3:5). Saul had been trained in error and believed that error was truth. Any teaching contrary to what he had been taught in younger years was immediately rejected.

The opposition of his family to his obedience of the gospel presented strong pressure (Galatians 1:14; 2 Corinthians 11:22). If Saul forsook Judaism he would be rejecting his family.

Prejudice within his heart sought an exclusiveness in religious matters (Philippians 3:5). Saul refused to consider other teachings. He was

quick to condemn other ways without giving them thought and study.

Pride sought to keep him from admitting that he had made a mistake in religion (Galatians 1:10). Imagine how hard Satan made it for this ardent Pharisee to say, "I'm wrong in religious matters."

Please note that these same "ruts" that kept Saul lost, continue to hinder many today in obeying God's will. Many refuse to obey God because they have been trained differently. Some refuse to obey because they believe they will be rejecting their families. Others refuse to obey because of religious prejudice—they refuse to think "their" way is inconsistent with God's way. Pride hinders many who refuse to admit, "I have been wrong all of these years regarding God's Word."

Saul's life alerts us to the present dangers of religious ruts in our lives. Saul cautions us to be on the alert for these ruinous ruts and be ready to jump out of them before disaster comes (Philippians 3:8-11).

## THE FREEDOM FROM RELIGIOUS RUTS

First, *let us avoid an "inherited faith"* that is simply accepted without an honest study of the Bible (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:14-18).

Second, *let us be aware of emotionalism* that tries to justify sin and excuse "religious ruts" in our lives. Satan wants us to think it is all right for people to follow many "ways" because such deludes millions into thinking there is no danger in remaining in "religious ruts" (2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12).

Third, *let us shun the proud arrogance that refuses to recognize God's will.* May all be humble enough to admit that we can be wrong in religious matters. If we do not rest upon a consistent interpretation of God's Word we will likely fall into some "religious ruts."

Fourth, *let us avoid indifference and apathy* about our beliefs in religious matters. It really did matter what Saul believed. It really did matter what Saul practiced. If he would not escape the penalties for failing to do exactly as God's Word commanded, neither can we (Joshua 1:7, 8).

Fifth, *let us avoid a zeal that is blinding and is governed by ignorance.* Christians are to be known for their zeal (Ecclesiastes 9:10). But this zeal is to be controlled by a knowledge of God's commands (see Romans 10:2; Galatians 4:18).

## CONCLUSION

Many churches are like the conservatories in which the members are like a flower in a flowerpot: There it is put down and cannot get out; little sticks are put down beside it to keep it in a particular position, and every branch that attempts to go beyond a given point is instantly snipped off in order that the flower may assume an ideal shape. Members of many churches are like geraniums trained for show, tied up, and constrained in root, branch, and stem. Thousands in churches sit around in their respective rows and take whatever nourishment is dealt out to them, and grow in just the shape as prescribed for them by those who have the charge. These are so bound that they have no voice in determining what kind of structure shall be made for their souls. These are confined by the "religious ruts."

The greatest tragedy of "religious ruts" is spoken of by Isaiah and the Psalmist:

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood" (Isaiah 1:11-15).

I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before Me. I shall take no young bull out of your house, nor male goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all it contains. Shall I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of male goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High; and call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me (Psalms 50:8-15).

It is a tragedy that can come upon all if they are not diligent (Matthew 15:8, 9). Knowing these facts, let us be careful that we, as the unfortunate lady described in the beginning, are not "ruined by the ruts"! —John Kachelman